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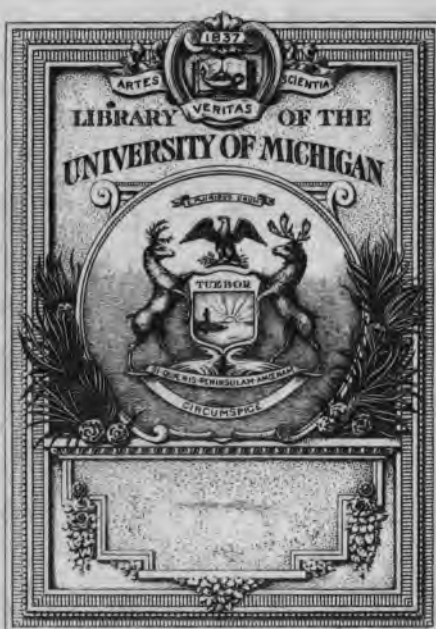
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# ANATOLE FRANCE

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BY

LEWIS PIAGET SHANKS

CHICAGO

LONDON

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1919



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## PREFACE

AMONG the would-be volunteers of 1914 was the virtual Dean of French letters, a man of seventy years. We were surprised, not at his age but at his transformation; for nearly twenty years he had preached pacifism, and the brotherhood of man. We were surprised because he was Anatole France. Yet scarcely twenty-five years before, this radical was known as a skeptic, an intellectual hedonist, a dilettante; in 1889 no one could foresee the future dreamer of reform in the nihilistic pages of *Thaïs*. So his final heroic inconsistency is only a part of a greater problem, a single phase in a life's drama, whereby a skeptic and a pessimist developed into a man of action.

This problem, this drama, must be the excuse of the present volume. Its hero is perhaps our greatest living man of letters. For nearly half a century Anatole France has found the muses

gracious. He has climbed the Sacred Mount; he has had for many years his cult and his votaries. But his company might be larger—ought to be larger now that we have such admirable translations of the master. His company must be larger, if reason and humanity are ever to do away with war. If that vision may be brought ever so little nearer, if some individualists and pessimists should find in his pages the Damascus road toward a broader and brighter ideal, this book will find its apologia.

The story of an intellectual Odyssey, it was prompted by the same optimism as the modern traveler's log. In most books of travel the best things are the illustrations. So with quotations in biography and criticism—prudence no less than reverence requires them. Moreover, even the temptation of a ready camera is less than the desire to translate—to attempt a translation of Anatole France, a perpetual challenge despite the quality of one's results. To quote wherever possible, to condense and still quote, and to strive to set one's mosaic in a surface not absolutely disparate is of course a bit presumptuous; but how else could one present a writer so personal, whose thoughts and impressions

and memories are day by day woven into his work?

With such a literary Proteus, no stippled portrait is worth a series of sketches. One must tell the history of his ideas—the story of his mind's development. So, beginning with his heredity and early environment, we follow the poet and thinker through his first imaginative enthusiasm for science, until his belief in her dies away in skepticism and he returns to the world of poetry and art. After this conflict of youthful illusions, when a victorious intellect has rejected the faith and effort which its philosophy finds vain, comes the second phase: content now to enjoy his own talents, without attempting to coordinate them to any principle but style, the erstwhile Darwinian develops his skepticism philosophically in order to range more freely in the galleries of the past. This is Anatole France in his forties, dilettante and disciple of the later Renan. But he wearies in the Palace of Art, grows sick of self and eager for a stronger draught of reality. Hence the descent into the arena, provoked by the Dreyfus affair and the corruption of French politics: the idealist, the man of heart and imagination now dominates the *intellectuel*. Then comes the reaction, after less than a decade of



contact with life—when the student realizes that man is not the reasonable creature he had imagined, but a selfish animal, bound by inertia and hostile to reform; and the genial irony of his forties turns to satire, ending in the sneer of a cynic who can only caricature humanity. Anatole France is then an idealist turned inside out by life, an inverted idealist like Swift in his last phase, distilling acid sarcasm until again he is swept from philosophy into action by the world war.

Now that the conflict is ended, and statesmen are debating the measures which make for peace, it is well to sharpen our vision and our intellects by a study of Anatole France. It is good to chronicle his long war upon war, his stand against intolerance and social injustice, lest we think that victory falls only by the sword. It will not be useless to review the career of Anatole France, so typical of the mingled idealism and pessimism of the last century. Secure in the larger perspective of a conflict which ends an epoch, yet remembering the sufferings of a generation defeated and thrown back upon itself by the lack of a hopeful national life, we can understand his personality as we can explain his books. If we read them in this spirit, which is that of a philosophic

pilgrim, even uncomfortable inns will merge into the shadows of the panorama viewed from the armchair at the journey's end. To read all of Anatole France is to see how a sensitive artist found himself in an unfavorable environment, and by giving us his egoism in patient works of art, proved, even more than by his propaganda, a great "doer" and a real benefactor of humanity. After all, "l'artiste doit aimer la vie et montrer qu'elle est belle. Sans lui, nous en douterions."

L. P. S.

Franklin Inn Club,  
Philadelphia.



## CHAPTER I

### THE CHILD IN OLD PARIS.



# I

“THE first idea which I got of the universe,” says Anatole France in *Pierre Nozière*, “came to me from my old pictorial Bible. It was a series of seventeenth-century woodcuts, with a Garden of Eden fresh and fertile as a Lowland landscape. . . . Every evening, under the lamp, I would turn its ancient leaves, until sleep, the delicious sleep of childhood, carried me off in its warm shadows, and the patriarchs, the apostles, and the lace-decked ladies lived on through my dreams their supernatural lives. My Bible had become for me the most vivid reality, and to it I strove to conform the universe.”

His universe at that time was the sleepy old Quai Malaquais. There, in the heart of Paris, Anatole France was born, the sixteenth of April, 1844; and his eyes first opened on the Seine and the Louvre, the Cité and the carven towers of Notre Dame. But the universe grows

with the growing legs of its children. At five, this little world extended from the Rue Bonaparte to the Ile Saint-Louis, and the "River of Glory," which he followed every day with his nurse, gave him back the Noah's Ark of his Bible in the floating baths of La Samaritaine. To the east, beyond the Pont d'Austerlitz, he saw in imagination the mysterious realms of the Scriptures, and the Jardin des Plantes was clearly the Garden of Eden, for hadn't his mother told him that Eden was a garden with trees and all the animals of the Creation?

So at least we read in *Pierre Nozière*. Here, in the exquisite *Livre de mon ami*, and in *Le petit Pierre*, now publishing in the *Revue de Paris*, is set down a man's story of his boyhood; and if sentiment in an ironist is an index of candor, these books contain as much truth as poetry. Theirs is no merely symbolic truth, transformed by time and the artistic temperament.<sup>1</sup> Real memories alone could yield pages

<sup>1</sup> Confirmation of this may be found in a letter of Anatole France to a man of letters, reproduced in François Carez's *Auteurs contemporains* (p. 82): "Je vous confie que tout ce qui, dans ce volume (*le Livre de mon ami*), concerne le petit Nozière, forme un récit exact de mon enfance, sous cette réserve que mon père était non médecin mais libraire sur le quai Voltaire et que les choses domestiques étaient plus étroites et plus humbles chez nous qu'elles ne sont chez un petit médecin de quartier. Le caractère de mon père n'est pas moins conservé dans celui du docteur Nozière. Mon père est devenu un homme instruit, presque savant, à la fin de sa vie."

so charming, so significant; not one but reveals the future poet, already living in his world of dreams.

"My cosmography," he says in *Pierre Nozière*, "my cosmography was immense. I held the Quai Malaquais, where my room was, to be the center of the world. The green bedroom, in which my mother put my little bed beside her own, I looked upon as the point on which Heaven shed its rays and graces, as you may see in the pictures of the saints. And these four walls, so familiar to me, were filled with mystery none the less.

"At night in my cot-bed, I used to see strange faces, and all at once the warm and cozy bedroom, lit by the last dying gleams of the fireplace, would open wide to the invasion of the supernatural world.

"Legions of horned devils danced their rounds; then, slowly, a lady of black marble passed by, weeping, and it was only later that I found out that these hobgoblins were dancing in my brain. . . .

"According to my system, in which you must recognize that candor which gives to primitive cosmogonies their charm, the earth formed a large circle around my house. Every day I would meet, coming and going in the streets,



people who seemed occupied with a strange and amusing game, the game of life. I decided that there were a great many of them, perhaps more than a hundred.

"I did not think that they were under absolutely fortunate influences, sheltered like myself from all anxiety. To tell the truth, I did not think that they were as real as I was; I was not absolutely sure that they were real people, and when from my window I saw them pass, very tiny, over the Pont des Arts, they seemed to me playthings rather than persons, so that I was almost as happy as the boy-giant in the fairy-tale, who sat on a mountain and played with trees and cabins, cows and sheep, shepherds and shepherd-girls."

Such in embryo is the creative vision, the artist's vision. Certainly it is no ordinary stock which produced this dreamy, imaginative boy. An only son, born in his father's fortieth year, Jacques-Anatole Thibault owes to that father much more than the famous pseudonym. Noël Thibault too was a man of letters and a lover of the past. "France, libraire," for thus he signed his articles on bibliography, kept a bookshop at 9 Quai Malaquais, in the fine old building so long occupied by his successor Champion. A Royalist, devoutly Catholic, a *Ven-*

*déen* in origins and in every sympathy, he had served in the body-guard of Charles X, and he loved the *ancien régime* as he hated the Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Originally from Anjou, Noël Thibault had all the proverbial gentleness of the Angevin; he is depicted for us in Sylvestre Bonnard's memories of his father, ironical, indulgent, disillusioned: "il était fatigué, et il aimait sa fatigue."

The serenity of the Anjou country, with its placid rivers and its rolling hills—*la douceur angevine*—thus finds a reflection in the artist and his art. Yet if Anatole France shows this regional type in its amenity, he has no less the Angevin shrewdness and irony. Every lover of Taine's theory must rejoice in France's reminiscences of his grandmother, neither Royalist nor pious, but keen-witted, practical, and pagan, a true disciple of Voltaire. "She had no more piety than a bird," says her grandson: "she clearly belonged to the eighteenth century." Significant, too, is her prediction that the boy Anatole would be "a very different man from his father."

Grand'mère was right. The child had more than distinction of intellect, a much greater

<sup>2</sup> Yet no one knew that period better, as his learned bibliography shows.

gift than his father's sterile scholarship. He had the creative vitality, the exuberance of fancy and imagination which alone makes the artist. Like the old Bible, this came to him from his mother, from the merry, active, beauty-loving mother so affectionately portrayed in her son's books. Naïve, mystic, candidly religious—a true daughter of Bruges—she used to read to him the *Lives of the Saints*, and the charm of the old stories “filled the soul of the child with wonderment and love.” A dreamer already, he felt profoundly the mystic poetry of religious legend; his first hope of military glory gave way to a dream of sainthood, and he lived out the sacred stories with all the seriousness of real experience. His refusal to eat, his distribution of coppers and toys to the poor, his attempt to make a hair shirt from the wiry cover of an old armchair, and the whipping he received from an inconsiderate maid, are related with inimitable grace and irony in the eighth chapter of *Le Livre de mon ami*: finally, “the difficulty of practising sainthood in family life” made him resolve to seek a hermitage in the Jardin des Plantes. There, on the morrow, he would live alone with all the animals of the Creation; there he would see, like Saint Anthony, the faun and the centaur, and

perhaps the angels would visit him beneath the cedar of Lebanon, on the hill where, in imagination, he saw "God the Father with his white beard and his blue robe, with arms outstretched to bless him, beside the antelope and the gazelle." But when the future author of *Thaïs* confides this plan to his mother as she combs his hair, and she asks him why he wants to be a hermit, it becomes plain that his dream of glory is not the glory of the saints: "I want to be famous," he replies, "and put on my visiting-cards 'Hermit and Saint of the Calendar,' just as papa puts on his: 'Laureate of the Academy of Medicine.'"

True or apocryphal, this ended his ascetic projects—less successful even than the boyish prank of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who actually put a similar plan into execution. After all there were other things to interest him, prisoned as he was in the quiet imaginative life of an only child. "It was not large, that life of mine," he tells us, "but it was a life, that is, the center of things, the middle of the world." The very opening of his mother's closets, piled high with mysterious forbidden boxes, filled him with poetic curiosity. He had his playthings—and the playthings of his dreams. He wondered at "the number of lines and faces

that could be got out of a pencil." He felt, too, the charm of flowers, of perfumes, the delights of food and dress. But what he loved most, he confesses, more than any of these things, was everything together, the house, the air, the light, the life of his very downy nest. After all, the practice of asceticism might have been hard for this young Epicurean.

Not a desert cave, but a desk and a library, is the proper stage for a poet's seclusion. And to such things the future writer turned instinctively. "I lived with my books," he tells us, "my pictures, my paste-pot, my color boxes, and all the belongings of a bright yet delicate boy, already sedentary, naïvely initiating himself by his toys into that feeling for form and color, the source of so much pain and so much joy. Already I had a bent toward desk work, a love of pictures cut out patiently by the evening lamp, a profound feeling for things pictorial. I have never needed, even in my early years, to possess things in order to enjoy them." This is the future biographer of Sylvestre Bonnard and the Maid of France.

Given such a nature, a boy needs only a hero to shape a definite ideal. The hero appeared in the person of a collector, a hero of the desk and the card-catalogue. Clad in flowered dress-

ing-gown and nightcap, this old scholar, immortalized under the sobriquet of Old Le Beau, passed his days cataloguing books and medals in a house packed to the roof with curiosities. So Anatole, at ten, "thought it finer to make card-catalogues than to win battles. He would catalogue, and I, with eyes wide open and bated breath, would admire him. I did not imagine that there could be any finer business to give one's life to. But I was mistaken. A printer was found to print the catalogue of Old Le Beau, and then I saw my friend correcting the proofs. He would put mysterious signs on the margin of the leaves. Then I understood that this was the finest occupation in the world, and I promised myself that I too would some day have my proof-sheets to revise."

The picturesque dressing-gown of the disciple is of gray frieze, his cap of red velvet, and the proof-sheets have come, so numerous that all the first delight—a veritable justification of the universe—has long since passed away. And it is not hard to see how the old antiquary, in his house piled with all the flotsam of time, set the example of intellectual curiosity and patient scholarship that even a poet needs to see clearly into the labyrinth of the past. To such an example, possibly, is due the "Life of Joan of

Arc." But the reader wonders in vain who was this Monsieur Le Beau, the collector who lives in art by his kindness to a lonely child.

Was he his father, the book-lover and bibliographer of the Quai Malaquais? After all a father is a boy's first hero, and a father's trade his first dream of his own. Or was he possibly one of his father's patrons, "le bibliophile Jacob" or the collector Marmier, met in the quiet old shop where the boy "played with dumpy duodecimos as with dolls"? In any case we must not overlook the bookstore. It was here that young Anatole grew up, surrounded by the motley ranks of an ever-changing library. Here it was that he got his first notions of history and society, from books and from the conversations of his father and his father's friends—a memory which he used later in picturing the book-shop of Paillot; and as the patrons of this old Royalist were mostly Royalists too, *ci-devant* aristocrats and conservatives, their remarks on the Revolution could not fail to influence the future author of *Les Dieux ont soif*. It is easy to imagine them—some of the older ones, perhaps, wearing the high neck-cloths and tight trousers Daumier loved to draw, unmindful of the shy little lad reading in the corner; but it was for him that

they talked, after all. Disciples of Voltaire, they were the first to show him, in their endless arguments, the multiplicity of truth.

Thus the old bookstore by the Seine became the nursery of a genius. In ludicrous contrast, we have the picture of his first school, a "highly-recommended" establishment of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. There, in a room full of mischief-loving youngsters presided over by an absent-minded spinster, he made acquaintance with the world of human society, discovered the practical life and found his first friend in a boy who taught him to raise silkworms in his desk. There, too, the charms of poetry were revealed to him, when the melancholy school-mistress read to the class her melancholy ballad *Pauvre Jeanne*. The tears which he shed on that occasion brought him not the cross of honor, but the vision of that beauty which rhyme and rhythm give.

Practical education, however, was not to be gained here. After copying for six weeks the same line of poetry, the boy was withdrawn from the *pension* by his dissatisfied parents. Although not rich, they now chose for him the Collège Stanislas, an expensive and aristocratic school directed by Jesuits. At Stanislas, "un vieux collège un peu monacal," he came under



the instruction of ecclesiastics, learned the poetry that legend and ritual inspire. Esthetically the priesthood may well have had its moment of attraction for him. He may have lived in sympathy the episode of young Piedagnel in *L'Orme du mail*. In any case the Church gave him her best for his intellectual training; like Jules Lemaitre, he enjoyed the discipline which perfected the mind of Renan. "In the Temple," said the good Abbé Jérôme Coignard, "were forged the hammers which destroyed the Temple."

Nor must we forget, in his education, the inestimable influence of Paris. To such a boy, responsive to the pictorial, to the charm of the past, the chance of living in the City of Light was a veritable godsend. "It does not seem to me possible," he modestly affirms, "for a man to have an absolutely commonplace turn of mind, if he has been brought up on the quays of Paris, opposite the Louvre and the Tuileries, and facing the glorious Seine, which runs amidst the belfries and towers and spires of Old Paris. . . . There, the book-stalls, the curiosity shops, and the old print stores display the most beautiful products of art and the most interesting tokens of the past. Every shop-window is an attraction for the eyes and the

intellect: the passer-by who knows how to see always carries away some thought, as the bird flies off with a bit of straw for its nest."

When Anatole France was a boy, this quarter was even richer in atmosphere than it is to-day. Old prints, old paintings, old books, old furniture—every foot of the quays was full of them. Carved credence-tables, flowered Japanese vases, bits of enamel, faïence, brocaded stuffs and figured tapestries served to illustrate the old books lying so invitingly open: the famous curiosity shop described in Balzac's *Peau de chagrin* shows what these places used to be. This larger school Anatole France knew before he ceased to wear short trousers and embroidered collars; "when we went to the Tuileries Gardens on holidays, we used to pass along this learned Quai Voltaire, and as we walked, hoop in hand and ball in pocket, we used to look into the shop-windows just like the old gentlemen, and form our own ideas on all these strange things which had come down from the past, from the mysterious past."

Add to this his daily journeys, first along the quays, then down that fascinating Rue Bonaparte which takes one past an endless row of curio-shops to the Luxembourg Gardens and the Collège Stanislas, situated in the Rue Notre-

Dame des Champs. Every day he saw the shop-windows, greeted the white statues of the gardens gleaming against their fernlike background of trees, felt all the multifarious life of Old Paris. So the streets gave him his first understanding of the world. Here he saw the milkwomen, the water-carriers, the coal-heavers at their tasks, and learned the law of cheerful labor which Paris teaches in every shop and alley. Like *Coppée*, he loved this humble Paris, only he loved it still as a spectator. It was all a part of his vision of the universe, a poet's vision, destined to be engraven in pages expressive as a Whistler etching, pages discreetly evocative of the Paris that we love.

He learned, in fine, that busy idling which distinguishes the artist from the scholar. And even in school he retained the same discursive spirit: he was constantly reprimanded for his devotion to interests "extraneous to the class." Yet he was a good student, particularly in the humanities. "You may call me an aristocrat or a mandarin, but I believe that six or seven years of literary culture give to the mind prepared to receive it a nobility, a force and a beauty which is not to be obtained by other means."

At Stanislas Anatole France received this

literary training. And he was prepared for it. Already Livy set him to dreaming. When his old Jesuit Latin master read the sentence: "The remnants of the Roman army reached Canusium through the favor of the night," he would see "passing silently in the moonlight, over the naked plain and the long road flanked with tombs, livid faces, foul with blood and dust, battered helmets, wrenched and tarnished breast-plates, broken swords." Such a vision shows that Anatole France was already old enough to feel the grandeur that was Rome.

"Then it was Virgil, and then Homer. ' I saw Thetis rising like a white cloud from the sea, I saw Nausicaa and her companions, and the palm-tree of Delos, and the sea and the earth and the sky, and the tearful smile of Andromache. . . . And I understood it, I felt it. For six months I could not leave the Odyssey. . . . I was with Ulysses on the wine-dark sea. Then I discovered the tragic poets. Sophocles, Euripides, opened to me the enchanted world of heroes, initiated me into the poetry of woe. At each tragedy that I read, there were new joys, tears and ecstasies unknown till then.

"Alcestis and Antigone gave me the noblest dreams that ever boy did dream. Bent over my dictionary, above my ink-bespattered desk,

I would see divine figures, arms of ivory drooping over white tunics, and hear voices sweeter than the sweetest music, lamenting in harmony."

So Anatole France found in a Jesuit college the Greek beauty, the vision of life which he gives back to us, the qualitative ideal still dominant in the many-textured web of his world-old culture. That ideal, the *symmetria prisca*, he never ceased to cultivate, to worship: his favorite poets are still the poets of the pagan world. And no lover of his well-nigh perfect prose, candid and full of charm as only a Grecian could create, but will exclaim, as he does in one of his early novels: "O Athens, city ever to be revered, if thou hadst never existed, the world would not yet know what beauty is!"

## CHAPTER II

THE YOUTH AND THE PARNASSIAN.



## II

APPLE or quince, the fruit to come is shown by April's leaves or flowers. So we have quoted rather largely from *Le Livre de mon ami*, that delightful autobiography of Anatole France. Read the book, if you would see how a genius unfolds! After childhood comes adolescence, and an account of a first love turned into tragedy by his fatal reply to his lady, "Oui, monsieur." Racked with self-recrimination, inept and stupid, the self-conscious boy is sent off on his vacation. He discovers the sea, the mysterious ocean which everywhere and for every humanist, still beats with "the surge and thunder of the Odyssey"; he dreams away a summer filled with vague desires; and by the sea, on the cliffs alone with his pocket Virgil, he finds at last the secret of his trouble in the love-story of the hapless Carthaginian queen.

Yet sensitive as he was, the fate of Dido was not to be his. He returned to Paris for his last



year at Stanislas: "he was very unhappy and he passed his examinations." Of course this was to be expected; even then, his is a mind too intelligent to yield entirely to feeling. Timid in manners, he was already bold in thought, independent, an *intellectuel* despite the distractions of a temperament distinctly artistic. But he had a friend to help him, a fellow-student, afterward distinguished for the science he brought to the study of autographs. Etienne Charavay was just the mentor to instil in him the love of erudition needed in a true historical vision.

Best of all, his development was not hurried. It was given him to ripen slowly. He was to pass "many happy years, without writing, leading a contemplative and solitary life." Some teaching and a little desultory journalism fell to his lot; but through it all he had leisure to read, to dream, to think. Little by little, school and university were replaced by other teachers, and the soul of the boy became the mirror of a skeptic's world.

"O sordid old Jews, candid booksellers of the quays, my masters, what gratitude I owe you! More than the professors of the University, you gave me my intellectual education. You spread before my delighted eyes the mysterious forms of a past life, and every sort of precious

monument of the thought of man. 'Twas by ferreting in your book-boxes, by contemplating your dusty stores, laden with the wretched relics of our fathers and with their beautiful thoughts, that imperceptibly I absorbed the sanest philosophy.

"Yes, my friends, 'twas by reading the worm-eaten books that you sold for a living, that I acquired, boy that I was, a profound consciousness of the passing of things and the nothingness of it all. I divined that men were but changing images in the universal illusion, and from that day I was inclined to sadness, gentleness, and pity."

This was the youth of twenty-three who in 1867 was admitted to the noisy sessions of the Parnassian poets. They met in the book-shop of their publisher Lemerre, to hear Leconte de Lisle expound the theories of a new poetic art. Romantic lyrists had failed through abuse of self-confession, so the Parnassians renounced them all save the more objective Vigny, Gautier, and Baudelaire. Self-repression—the symbol of Vigny's *La mort du loup*—was the new ideal; and Gautier and Baudelaire had revealed the plastic, picturesque, almost metallic style which alone could fittingly clothe their impersonal vision of the world. Thus, out of ro-

manticism, arose a new poetic theory, and as the master had now published *Les Poèmes barbares* as well as *Les Poèmes antiques*, the word had twice become flesh. Splendid, barbaric, passionately impassive, a new lyric realism was born, vivid as the prose of *Salammbô* and *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*.

Realism was now the dominant mood of art. It was the child of science, this rejection of the personal element in literature;—child of the great scientific movement which swept over Europe just after the middle of the century. Darwin's *Origin of Species*, translated in 1862, had been followed in France by Claude Bernard's *Philosophie expérimentale*. Darwinism and determinism became the watchwords of that generation. Had not Taine just published the preface of his *English Literature*, reducing genius itself to the product of the race, the milieu, and the moment? What wonder then that the new poetry should reflect the naturalism which had spread from philosophy to art?

Poetry, however, must discover an esthetic basis for determinism. Hence it was that Leconte de Lisle turned to India, to find in the philosophy of the Hindus the secret of a fatalism at once scientific and fervidly religious. If science had done away with a personal God,

the poet might still invoke Maya and find consolation :

“L’invisible Maya, créatrice du monde,  
Espoir et souvenir, le rêve et la raison,  
L’unique, l’éternelle et la sainte Illusion.”<sup>1</sup>

So, after the author of *Poèmes antiques*, Anatole France espoused Illusion in his turn. Like his master, he gilds agnosticism with poetry, looking less to India than to the skepticism of Greek philosophy. Not even a subjective nature escapes the influence of the age.

Six years were to pass before his first verses grew into a book, the slender volume called *Les Poèmes dorés*. Before 1873 we have only scattered verse, appearing for the most part in ephemeral reviews. There was, for instance, *La Gazette rimée*, published by Lemerre in support of the new school. Anatole France collaborated on this together with Paul Verlaine. Two poems, not deemed worthy of inclusion in the volume, had appeared in June, 1867, *Denys de Syracuse* and *Les légions de Varus*; and their manifest political allusions probably had some part in the suppression of the young re-

<sup>1</sup>(No merit of literal accuracy or literary beauty is claimed for the versions given in these footnotes: *Traduttore, traditore*.)

“Goddess invisible, that made the world,  
Hope, memory, our reason and our dream,  
Illusion, single, everlasting, holy.”

view. He had also contributed to another little periodical, *Le Chasseur bibliographe*, becoming its editor that same year. Bibliographical articles written jointly with his father, bits of dramatic criticism of his own, fantasies in prose—such were his contributions to this review; among them we find, however, a pagan-Christian poem of the Alexandrian age:

"En ce temps-là vivait une femme au pays  
Des Egyptiens, belle, et qu'on nommait Thais..."<sup>2</sup>

Anatole France was now a Parnassian in the bud, slowly preparing his first volume of poems. And as a Parnassian, interested in their great precursor, it was not fortuitous that literary piety should have led him at the same time to undertake a serious study of Alfred de Vigny. Published in 1868, this pledge to scholarship offsets his devotion to the muse. But when, two years later, the war broke out between France and Germany, it was still his pocket Virgil which he carried with him to the front; and he tells us later<sup>3</sup> how he and a comrade sat reading it during the attack on La Faisanderie, while the cannon-balls fell hissing into the Marne.

<sup>2</sup> "In those days lived a woman fair  
In Egypt: Thais was her name...."

<sup>3</sup> *Vie littéraire*, II, 309.

*Les Poèmes dorés* finally appeared in 1873. Great poetry it is not, but it is fine verse, wrought as carefully as an etching, and delicately luminous as its title suggests. Indeed, the first poem gives the key-note to the volume, a sunny neo-Greek pantheism, serenely fatalistic, the Epicureanism of Renan cast into the verse form of Théophile Gautier.

"Sois ma force, ô Lumière! et puissent mes pensées,  
Belles et simples comme toi,  
Dans la grâce et la paix, dérouler sous ta foi  
Leurs formes toujours cadencées!

"Donne à mes yeux heureux de voir longtemps encor  
En une volupté sereine,  
La Beauté se dressant marcher comme une reine  
Sous ta chaste couronne d'or.

"Et lorsque dans son sein la Nature des choses  
Formera mes destins futurs,  
Reviens baigner, reviens nourrir de tes flots purs  
Mes nouvelles métamorphoses."<sup>4</sup>

\* "Oh Light, be thou my strength! May thoughts like thee  
Simple and fair,  
Reveal to me thy grace, thy peace—declare  
Thy limpid melody.

"Oh Light! Long let these blessed eyes behold  
—Thrilled, but serene—  
Beauty arise, and bearing like a queen  
Thy virgin crown of gold.

"And when Old Nature to her breast receives  
This dust, to form  
New lives therefrom, come back, come back and warm  
My flowers and leaves!"

Thus does poetry transform the cold truths of science. Darwin only awakens a forgotten pantheism, and Anatole France, like Swinburne just across the Channel, celebrates in the fullness of youth a pagan hymn to life. Vowed to impersonality by his master's example, the young veteran of '70 sings of war only as the eternal conflict in the animal world; and the fate of the dying stag or dragon-fly, like the dim instinct of trees or the longing of flower for flower, is but a note in the larger song of life, life and that eternal Eros which for Darwin as for Epicurus long ago, builds without ceasing this world of fact or dream.

"L'Amour, l'Amour puissant, la Volupté féconde,  
Voilà le dieu qui crée incessamment le monde,  
Le père de la vie et des destins futurs!  
C'est par l'Amour fatal, par ses luttes cruelles,  
Que l'univers s'anime en des formes plus belles,  
S'achève et se connaît en des esprits plus purs."<sup>5</sup>

The volume was dedicated to Leconte de Lisle. One may trace the disciple here and there—in the coloring of *Homai* and in that

<sup>5</sup> " 'Tis Love the god, and Love's delight  
That builds the world incessantly,  
—Father of Life, and Destiny—  
All Beauty owns his secret might;  
Grows the world fairer in our sight?  
Completer, richer, conscious of  
Itself in clearer minds?—Praise Love  
And all his conflicts infinite."

vivid picture of the Deluge, *La fille de Caïn*, yet nowhere will be found the midday glory of *Poèmes barbares*, splendidly oriental as a scimitar glittering in the sun. In the lesser poet the richness of the oil-painting fades to the delicacy of water-color. Nor does the disciple catch the austere religious fervor of *Les Poèmes antiques*. No Buddhistic renunciation gives lyric fire to these verses, wholly Greek in their sane and smiling paganism. Even the thought of death inspires only a deeper love of life, as may be seen in *La Mort*:

"Si la vierge vers toi jette sous les ramures

Le rire par sa mère à ses lèvres appris ;

Si, tiède dans son corps dont elle sait le prix,

Le désir a gonflé ses formes demi-mûres ;

"Le soir, dans la forêt, pleine de frais murmures,

Si, méditant d'unir vos chairs et vos esprits,

Vous mêlez, de sang jeune et de baisers fleuris,

Vos lèvres, en jouant, teintes du suc des mures,

"Si le besoin d'aimer vous caresse et vous mord,

Amants, c'est que déjà plane sur vous la mort :

Son aiguillon fait seul d'un couple un dieu qui crée.

"Le sein d'un immortel ne saurait s'embraser.

Louez, vierges, amants, louez la Mort sacrée,

Puisque vous lui devez l'ivresse du baiser."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "If a maid mocks you, laughing in the way

Her mother taught—or runs beneath the trees ;

If in her bosom's budding ecstasies

Desire burns, although she murmurs nay :



Life and love and death, and all the mystery of beauty in this flood of appearances which is the world—bits of sunny landscape, forest nooks, nocturnes or marines delicate as an aquarelle—such is the fabric of his verse. Slighter and less vivid, his pictures often recall Gautier's:

"Ruines d'un temple où des lyres  
Pendent à des chevilles d'or,  
Où des pieds de nymphes encor  
Dansent en de joyeux délires,

"Muette, la maison des Rois  
Est assise comme une veuve,  
Sur la rive droite du fleuve,  
Sous les nymphées blancs et froids."

Books, too, are his inspiration. History and legend give us poems like *La danse des morts* and *Le Vénusberg*. *Sur une signature de Marie Stuart*, dedicated to Charavay and suggestive

"If the cool whispering woods, the evening breeze,  
Lure flesh to flesh and soul to soul bewray,  
And young blood's ardor joins in amorous play  
Your red lips redder yet with mulberries:

"Oh lovers! If love's longing holds you thrall,  
'Tis the Dark Angel's wing that trails above,  
She that alone creates, has made you gods!

"Immortal hearts would ever be as clods.  
So praise ye Death, maidens and lovers all,  
To whom ye owe the rapturous kiss of Love!"

"Ruins of a fane, where lyres  
Hang on carven pegs of gold,

of long evenings spent over his portfolio of autographs, reveals a deep sense of the romance of history. But it was three years after this, when Anatole France had emerged from his twenties and settled down in his library, like Bonnard, that he turned to the past and drew from it the exquisite story of *Les Noces corinthiennes*.

*Les Noces corinthiennes* is a dream of Greece set to the music of Racine. Finer than his earlier sketches, because a larger composition, more lyric because of his feeling for the period, this little drama in Alexandrines is not merely a poet's monument to the land which had revealed to him the vision of beauty; it is his first historical miniature, delicately etched as *Thaïs*. The very spirit of Hellas—so far as we moderns can divine it—inspires him: the candor of Homer, the lyricism of Theocritus, the melody and pathos of Euripides. Here is presented the Greek view of life, calm and sane and undisturbed by any sense of the infinite beyond:

“....La vie est bonne,  
Car c'est un grand Démon, ami, qui nous la donne.

Where the wood-nymphs, as of old,  
Dance in gay delirious choirs;

“And the palace, silent, still  
As a widow in her weeds,  
Sits among the river's reeds,  
'Mid the marbles cold and chill.”

L'enfant jette en jouant les osselets et rit,  
 Le jeune homme au sang vif médite en son esprit  
 De rencontrer, le soir, la vierge sous les saules.  
 Le blanc vieillard dont l'âge a courbé les épaules,  
 Assis au banc du seuil, sous les astres en chœur  
 A parler sagement réjouit son cher cœur.  
 Au long des jours de miel et des heures amères,  
 Suis doucement le fil que te tournent les Mœres.  
 L'homme aux ardents désirs, quand l'Hadès l'a vaincu,  
 A désiré de vivre et n'a jamais vécu.  
 Craignons les vains souhaits et l'attente chagrine."<sup>8</sup>

Thus speaks the father of the heroine to her lover Hippias, when the day is over and the vintage done. But the mother of Daphne has a different dream of the world: Kallista is a Christian convert, burning with zeal for the new faith, austere and fervid as Polyeucte. Sick of an unknown malady and eager to secure life and health for good works, she has consecrated her unwilling daughter to Christ, invoking God's vengeance upon herself if Daphne

<sup>8</sup> " . . . Life's good, I know,  
 For 'tis a gift some spirit doth bestow.  
 The child laughs o'er the toys he throws in play,  
 The youth, hot-blooded, plans at close of day  
 To meet the maiden underneath the trees.  
 The graybeard with his shoulders bent and old,  
 Sits by the threshold, 'neath the stars of gold,  
 And cheers his heart with wise discourse, at ease.  
 Oh friend, through mornings honey-sweet or bitter eves,  
 Follow the clue the fatal Triad weaves.  
 He who desires too much, if death befall,  
 Has hoped to live and never lived at all.  
 Avoid delays that vex and vain desires."

fail to pay the vow. So, while the nuptial chorus sings "Hymen O Hymenæe," the girl waves back the merry-makers and casts her ring into the fountain of the nymphs:

"Réjouis-toi, Dieu triste à qui plaît la souffrance!"

But the maiden's suffering has only begun. Hippias returns from his voyage to wed, and Daphne, leaving her seclusion to pay a last midnight visit to the house of her childhood, finds her lover sleeping on a lion's skin in the hall. He wakes, and pleads with her until her heart belies her promise:

*Daphné:*

Ouvre au ciel tes ailes de colombe;  
Viens, Esprit, verse-moi ta force! Je succombe.

*Hippias:*

Vois, il est doux d'aimer.

*Daphné:*

Je t'aime malgré moi.

*Hippias:*

C'est Eros qui le veut: il faut suivre sa loi.

Then the law of Eros becomes the law of tragic fatality. Kallista intervenes, but Daphne meets her lover in a pagan tomb. "They at least

have loved, and their ashes are content." There she prepares the poison obtained from the old witch, mingles it with the sacrificial wine of the wedding-feast, and, resolved to betray neither God nor her lover, dies a martyr to love, a Greek Atala.

This is in brief the plot of *Les Noces corinthiennes*. It is the story of the *Bride of Corinth*, adapted by Goethe from an old tradition. But finer than Goethe's delineation is the picture drawn by Anatole France, and only the fact that it is a picture, a fresco, not to be dismembered with impunity, stays us from quoting the verses of Daphne's farewell, her lament for life and love and her shattered dreams of motherhood:

"Et pourtant je vivrais si Dieu l'avait voulu."

Nor could the art of the story be shown by a single page. Scene by scene the poem unrolls, and vintagers or wedding-guests or chanting converts provide the choruses which frame each separate scene. The pagan ideal finds its foil in the zeal of the early Christians, as in the author the love of saintly legend and the love of Greek beauty: and the reader sees how the dreams of his childhood, the Bible stories read at his mother's knee, made it easy for him to

relive the age of faith he describes. In the Preface is found his real attitude: he knows "there is nothing certain outside the realm of science," but he also knows how unscientific it is to think with Renan that science can replace religion. "As long as man is suckled at a woman's breast, he will be consecrated in the temple and initiated into some mystery of the divine. He will have his dream. And what matter if the dream be false, provided it is fair? Is it not the destiny of man to be sunk in an everlasting illusion? And is not this illusion the very condition of life?"

Such a declaration might well be taken as prophetic. But equally significant, and charmingly autobiographical are the lines from another poem of this volume, *L'auteur à un ami*:

"Fatigués vers le soir de la plume et du livre,  
 Dans le proche jardin nous errons bien souvent,  
 Toujours surpris de vivre et de regarder vivre,  
 Nous jetons de vains mots emportés par le vent."<sup>9</sup>

Even the Luxembourg Gardens may yield the poet's sense of wonder—wonder dissolved into skepticism by the acid of thought. Of

• "Weary of book and pen, at close of day,  
 In the old park we stroll and talk at ease:  
 Surprised to be alive, to watch life's play,  
 We cast our vain thoughts to the evening breeze."

course, pessimism was then a literary mode—or is it the verse which in the final line calls for those vibrant labials? However that be, no words are vain, if only they are spoken by a poet, and some earlier lines, addressed to Théophile Gautier, reveal this skeptic's real appreciation of the hidden might of words:

"La parole est divine et contient toutes choses.  
Heureux qui, pour fixer son rêve intérieur,  
Employa sans faillir la forme et la lueur  
Dans le cristal des sons fatalement encloses!"<sup>10</sup>

And he goes on to show how words, in their magic, are the poet's immortality. Like Gautier, the poet survives in the survival of art. His dreams remain, and "break for us the bonds of space and time." In the absence of ultimate ends, we have at least art: art and the gift of living in the mind. For it is not merely the poet, it is the critic, the future dilettante, the disciple of Renan who concludes:

"Que pour nous l'univers se baigne tout entier  
Des effluves charmants de la pensée humaine!"<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> "Speech is divine and holds the world in fee.  
Fortunate he, who used to fix his dream  
Impeccably the magic line or gleam  
Locked in sound's crystalline by destiny!"

<sup>11</sup> "Oh sparkling stream of thought, immerse  
In beauty all the universe!"

## CHAPTER III.

**FROM NATURALIST TO SKEPTIC: SYLVESTRE  
BONNARD (1879-82).**





### III

TO begin with a book of verse is not rare among French writers, trained in classical metrics at school. After Euterpe comes the pedestrian Muse, all the richer for the secrets of color and rhythm, learned from an earlier love. Maupassant, Bourget, Daudet, and Richepin began as poets; Maeterlinck and Rostand wrote lyrics before they took up the drama. But this singing season, usually ended by twenty-five, lasted much longer in the case of Anatole France; his first volume of verse appeared at twenty-nine. Six years more were to pass before his first novel—years of mingled poetry and scholarship and literary journalism. He was still seeking his way in life, and fate generously gave him time to choose.

In 1874 we find him on the staff of the Senate Library. But he soon resigned, too much of an artist to endure the deadly routine and petty tyranny of bureaucracy. The situation was

curious, for his immediate superior here was the under-librarian Leconte de Lisle. Master and disciple had grown apart since the days of the dedication; an indocile Parnassian, Anatole France had provoked the leader's disdain. Now the younger poet found himself in the lion's mouth, and he was soon reduced to the position of a mere scribe. From this adventure sprang the article published in *Le Temps* when Leconte de Lisle was elected to the Academy, a criticism just and fair enough, but which provoked a public retort.

At any rate, Anatole France bade farewell to the desk and the card-catalogue. He returned to literature, finding a poet's joy in exploring the lives and works of the poets he loved. His study of Alfred de Vigny, already published (1868), had won a modest success, and this soon brought a number of commissions from his publisher. Lemerre wished him to write biographical introductions for a series of French classics: editions of Racine, Molière, La Fontaine, books like *Paul et Virginie*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Le Diable boiteux*, and *L'Heptaméron*. He began in 1874 with Racine, and in the next ten years completed fourteen similar studies, which have now been collected in the volume entitled *Génie latin*. Besides these, Charavay

printed three little monographs: *Jules Breton*, *Racine et Nicole*, and *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre*.

It was Lemerre who had published his verse. The publisher of the Parnassians did not fail to see the advantage his firm might gain from such an intellect, so he called the editor of his French classics into the sanctum as reader. This was really an anonymous début in contemporary criticism; but Anatole France knew that such work could never advance him, and he soon turned his long-'prenticed hand to the novel. Besides his study of Lucile de Chateaubriand, 1879 brought two essays in fiction, *Jocaste* and *Le Chat maigre*.

Both stories are disappointing in the light of his later books. But they mark a phase in the author's evolution; they show us a poet shrunk into a naturalistic novelist by the scientific spirit of his age. Beside *Sylvestre Bonnard*, their characters seem forced, unnatural, mere puppets moved by a mechanistic philosophy. It is the formula of the deterministic novel which gives us the pretty epileptic heroine of *Jocaste*, who loves a young man and lets herself be married to an old one; and it is the suggestivism of modern medicine which dictates the climax, when the Greek story of

Jocasta inspires to suicide the girl whose guilty love and lack of will allows her husband to be poisoned. Now the reader is reminded of Daudet, and now of Emma Bovary; the heroine and her father are both reflections of Flaubert. But the lover, the ironic young doctor, foreshadows in his materialism Doctor Trublet of *Histoire comique*; he too finds in nature "the scene of an everlasting slaughter," and his bleak determinism shows us the reaction of the age upon the youthful Anatole France.

*Le Chat maigre* is more sympathetic, although even weaker in its construction. It hardly owns a plot, this story of the indolent mulatto who, brought to Paris for an education, drifts through all the gutters of artistic Bohemia. A love-story, direct and primitive as its half-savage hero, is added for the sake of climax, but the book is at best only a gallery of portraits: the scheming failure Godet; Labanne the scholar-sculptor, who, like Pellerin in *L'Education sentimentale*, digests libraries instead of modeling; Branchut, the genius whose failure is due to the fact that he has "two grains of phosphorus in his brain instead of one"! "Le Chat Maigre," a tavern where the Bohemians meet to dine and discuss art and found literary journals, is probably a remi-

niscent caricature of some Parnassian haunt frequented by the author, while the whole novel very likely reflects his first curious exploration of Bohemian Paris, with its studios and its cafés.

Thus the story is a bit more sympathetic than *Jocaste*. For this another model than Daudet is perhaps responsible. France admired Dickens, and in *Le Chat maigre* he found a milieu where the naturalistic formula might be worked out with figures both picturesque and quaint, figures not wholly unlikable. Still he remains to the end a spectator of life and an aristocrat; he tells us that "democracy can never produce an art"; and carrying to the logical end his skepticism, he makes one speaker say that every artistic masterpiece is "a dangerous illusion and a culpable fraud."

The blight of naturalism, evidently, could scarcely strike deeper. But we have not yet done with its traces on Anatole France. In 1882, one year after *Sylvestre Bonnard*, appeared *Les Désirs de Jean Servien*, so different in its ethical attitude and manner that it probably was written first. For the philosophy of the genial old scholar is flatly contradicted by this dreary fatalistic account of a boy's long disillusion, true to the formula of naturalism

in spite of all the personal experience which it so coldly veils. It is vain for youth to plan an entire devotion to thought, vain to arrange a program of life amid the storms of adolescence. *Vere concordant amores*, and even the student is apt to yield to that imperious call. We need not ask what illusion lay behind this story of a child of the people, cursed by gifts of feeling and imagination, over-educated and weak, whose final ruin hangs on his love for an actress idealized in a Sophoclean rôle. It is the dreams of the poets which destroy Jean Servien, as they destroyed Emma Bovary: but the boy is first spoiled by a culture far beyond his condition in life, following the dying wish of a mother convinced that "education alone opens every door."

The naturalistic formula changes all this to tragic irony. "It is the education I gave him which turned him away from practical life," says the grief-stricken father. "It was school which made him fall in love with an actress." That is the moral of the story, delivered after Jean has failed in everything—when the boy who promised so much, weak-willed and repulsed by life at every turn, has perished in the riots of the Commune. The aristocratic standpoint is seen in this overemphasis of determin-

ism, never tired of contrasting Jean with a father content to remain in his class, or with the skeptical, bourgeoisie old aunt, so distrustful of books. It might seem that the author felt the dangers of his own character, and reacted against the idea of a culture which develops the mind and neglects the will. Or does he really express himself through the lips of Jean's tutor Tudesco, that earlier, viler Jérôme Coignard, who sings the charms of literature and defends the independence of the sage, who "refuses to sacrifice to the opinion of men a single one of his desires"?

For the biographer of Anatole France, *Jean Servien* represents the dreams of his adolescence, transposed into low surroundings such as the literary mode required. This is plain by a comparison with the latter part of *Le Livre de mon ami*. Jean is the adolescent Anatole, transmogrified by the dark-green goggles of naturalism, and his objective confession is undoubtedly earlier than *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*—that idyl of the indulgent ataraxy of the sage.

Thus Anatole France passed through naturalism in fiction, as he had passed through the Parnassian school in his verse. The true literary artist, the lover of books as well as life,



must begin by imitations. They are the five-finger exercises of his art, necessary, but only the toilsome road to music. What is less original than the background—one can hardly call it a plot—on which is depicted the portrait of Sylvestre Bonnard? Scholars have pointed out the sources of the novel, and they are plain to every cultivated reader; but all that is forgotten before the triumphant individuality of the result. Good old Bonnard is outwardly a conventional figure. He is the absent-minded professor of half a dozen novels, but of them all he is the one we should like to know. His philosophy of life, his humor, his irony, his infinite indulgence and humanity, make him unique; like Goethe in his conversations with Eckermann, he surveys the world from a rampart of Olympian calm. To create such a figure and not let him fall into platitude, to make him living and lovable, was at least original enough to merit an award from the Academy.

*Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* is an immense projection of the artistic imagination. It is a dream of old age made by a man still young, true to atmosphere because it grew out of that moment of languor which, in the sheltered life of a man of books, marks the passing of one's first youth and the acceptance of middle

age and its calmer joys. It shows us Anatole France in his full maturity, a "Nestor of letters" who has attained through study and reflection the supreme wisdom of the ages. "Time is gentle only to those who take it gently," says his hero—an old scholar who has discovered the secret of tranquillity in the life of books. *In angello cum libello*, no dilettante but an ardent medievalist, he surveys the world of Paris from his casement above the river, "in the most beautiful spot of all the world." Beneath him he sees the streets which he trod as a child, a discoverer no less than Columbus, a discoverer of Life; and the Seine and the Sainte-Chapelle, the Louvre and Notre-Dame—all this visible beauty of Old Paris with its jewels of carven stone, has become a part of his life, a part of himself, imaged within him in a thousand reflections of thought and feeling. "Without these things I should be nothing," he tells us. "That is why I love Paris with an unbounded love."

With all this Bonnard has not lost his humanity. In the winter of his life he looks out upon the world with pity and love, and finding that it holds the granddaughter of his boyhood's sweetheart, devotes himself to her happiness in tender piety for an unforgotten past. "Clé-

mentine is dead and her daughter is dead," he writes in his journal when at last he learns the fate of his lost Beatrice: "humanity is made up almost entirely of the dead, so few are the living compared to the multitude of those who have lived. Everything passes, since you and your daughter have passed beyond; but life is immortal, and it is life that we must love in its ever-changing forms."

What then is the crime imputed to this sage, to this idealized Renan, who sees in the universe only the reflection of his own soul? Merely the abduction of the girl Jeanne, who, thanks to a rascally guardian, is confined in a boarding-school where she is constantly ill-treated. As Bonnard is unable to help her, through his refusal to accept the advances of the virginal directress of the place, the candid old scholar simply carries her off. But he is saved from the consequences of this rash action by the flight of the shifty lawyer, and, appointed guardian in his stead, lives to see Jeanne married and to provide her dowry from the sale of a library collected through self-denial and toil.

Such is the slender plot of *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*. The story is nothing: our interest is in the portrait which it frames. All the romance of the intellectual life is shed upon

this figure. One thinks of those portraits by Whistler or Manet, set against a background which seems materialized from the soul of the model, under a light inevitable as fate itself. Whether in Paris or in the provinces, not one false note disturbs the harmony of the picture. The peace of life's Indian summer has fallen upon the old scholar; resigned to the approach of winter, he sits cheerful and undisturbed, in a calm filled with memories and thoughts which, birdlike, rise and circle and return with softly-flashing wings.

Quotation alone can show this intimate charm in the portrait. Take for instance the reverie which follows, consigned to his diary after his drive through the moonlight to the neglected chateau:

"Night reigns in noble languor over men and beasts, freed by her from their daily yoke, and I am sensible to her benign influence, although now, after sixty years of habit, I feel things only through the signs which represent them. For me the world has nothing left but words, so long have I studied them! Each of us in his own way dreams his dream of life. Mine I have dreamed in my library, and when my time comes to leave this world, may God take me on my step-ladder, before my book-laden shelves!"

Of course, this is the "*nox erat*" of Virgil. But Virgil only strikes the first chord: it is Sylvestre Bonnard who develops the melody. Besides, would such as he look at the world through other than classical eyes? Like his creator, old Bonnard is a Grecian: despite his medieval studies, the book-shelf next his hand is filled with the poets of antiquity. He understands the classic world, and when Madame Trépof rails at poor barren Sicily, she provokes an outburst which her butterfly soul is hardly fitted to comprehend:

"This land is not frightful, Madame. This land is a land of glory. Beauty is a thing so great and so august, that centuries of barbarism cannot so blot it out as not to leave something to adore. The majesty of Demeter of old still hovers over these arid hills, and the Greek muse, which sent its notes divine echoing over the Arethusa and the Menalus, still sings to my ear on the denuded mountain or in the dried-up spring. Yes, Madame, in earth's last days when, lifeless as the moon to-day, our globe shall roll through space its pallid corpse, the soil which bears the ruins of Selinonte will keep through the death of all things the traces of its beauty. And then there will be no frivolous lips to blaspheme its solitary grandeur."

One is reminded of *La prière sur l'Acropole*. And indeed Sylvestre Bonnard is so like Renan that his portrait could only be the work of a disciple. This Bonnard is a scholar: after exhausting the thirteenth century, he turns to botany as a recreation—but he is a scholar who knows the vanity of documents proving the sale of a rabbit-hutch six hundred years ago. He is a philosopher too, for his fruitless trip to Naples in quest of a manuscript ends with the admission: "We are eternal children and we never cease to run after new toys." A lover of books, he accepts philosophically Madame Trépof's passion for collecting match-boxes: "After all, they were making a collection, and could I laugh at them without laughing at myself?"

In fine, he is a disillusioned scholar, saddened by the thought that his effort to preserve a dead world is both laborious and vain. "All that has lived is the destined nutriment of new lives," and so the selling of his library to provide Jeanne's dowry is as significant as his turning from philology to botany in his old age.

Yet we must not conclude that Anatole France finds science less vain than philology. His change of attitude on this subject is revealed in the *Discours aux étudiants* (1910),

as a warning against youth's habit of hasty generalization. "In those days"—he refers to the period of his first novel—"in those days we were Darwinians, evolutionists; natural selection, systematic selection, the survival of the fittest, seemed to us immutable laws. And we were already working, with all our hearts, to draw from Lamarck's experiments and Darwin's theories a philosophy, a system of ethics, social laws, a political constitution and everything else!"

Now listen to Sylvestre once more—or rather to Anatole France as he expresses himself four years later in *Le Livre de mon ami*.

"Phenomena! Whom do they not attract? Does Science herself, whose claims are being constantly dinned into our ears, go beyond mere seeming? What, pray, does Professor So-and-so find at the bottom of his microscope? Appearances and nothing but appearances. As Euripides has said, we are vainly driven about by dreams."<sup>1</sup>

To the generation of Anatole France, it seemed that Science was to solve the riddle of life. He, too, had embarked with her on her quest of finality, only to find that the end of the expedition was to store the shelves of a

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 206.

museum. Led into erudition by its romance, as an alchemist is lured on by the dream of the philosopher's stone, Sylvestre Bonnard realizes at the end that "those who were worth more than he, the masters, the great, have died at their task without discovering that something which, having no body, has no name, yet without which no intellectual labor would be undertaken on this earth."

So, disillusioned, Anatole France turned from science to art, to explore the past to which his imagination called him, and to crystallize it, not in history, but in tales atmospheric as *Thaïs* and *Le procureur de Judée*.

But we must not run ahead so far. Sylvestre—or Anatole, if one prefer—is now forty, taking his first backward view. Imagine the memories of childhood reflected in a mind so richly stored—in a father's mind and heart—and you have *Le Livre de mon ami*. Imagine him at the same time composing a fairy-tale for a child, and you have *Abeille*. For Sylvestre Bonnard is Anatole France at forty. *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*, he can view the great milestone equably, and now, a little past the middle of the road, look forward to a tranquil journey down the farther slope. The vanity of the passions is known to him, as he has told



us in *Jean Servien*. He will repeat the lesson in *Le Lys rouge* and *Histoire comique*, because the artist deals with life as he finds it, but he will use his own senses as a basis for reflection, limit his hedonism mainly to an exercise of the intellect. This is the second phase of his talent, and the fruit of that intellectual Epicureanism we shall find in *Le Livre de mon ami*, *La Vie littéraire*, and the early tales.

*Le Livre de mon ami* dates from 1885. Bonnard had said, unconsciously defending his choice in life, "the future is made of the past." Now, when Anatole France turned back to his Golden Age, he repeats it as an excuse for setting down the story of his life as a child.

And nothing could be more charming than the book which came from it—the book drawn upon so largely in an earlier chapter. This volume surpasses even the finest *Contes*, for no sophisticated art can give the delicacy of an artist's feeling for stories he has lived. It is as if he had recovered something of the untarnished sensitiveness of childhood. "There are times when everything surprises me, times when the simplest things give me a mysterious thrill." And he senses the perpetual miracle of a child's life, full of poetry because enwrapped

in illusion, because each step forward is led by the mirage of the unknown.

"Tout dans l'immuable nature  
Est miracle aux petits enfants;  
Ils naissent, et leur âme obscure  
Eclôt dans des enchantements....

"L'inconnu, l'inconnu divin  
Les baigne comme une eau profonde,  
On les presse, on leur parle en vain,  
Ils habitent un autre monde....

"Leur tête légère et ravie  
Songe tandis que nous pensons:  
Ils font de frissons en frissons  
La découverte de la vie."<sup>2</sup>

This is the spirit of the second part of *Le Livre de mon ami*. After the story of his own childhood, Anatole France shows us a father realizing through sympathy the life of his little daughter. The rest of the book is less personal, narrative giving way to argument and discus-

<sup>2</sup> "Though the world unchanging rolls,  
All is wonder to the child;  
Life, to little darkling souls  
Dawns in long enchantments mild.

" 'Tis the unknown's magic spell,  
Holds them 'neath its mighty surge;  
Vain to speak to them, or urge,  
In a fairer world they dwell.

"Little heads a-dreaming still,  
Not for them reflection gray;  
Life's discoverers are they,  
Living in an endless thrill."

sion in the essay or dialogue form. Anatole France emphasizes the folly of children's books, books written for children only—as if the child were not filled with the thirst for the beautiful and the desire for the unknown! He would have children read the *Odyssey* in translation, *Don Quixote*, or *Robinson Crusoe*; he would never give books of popular science to the very young, or “tell children about guano instead of fairies.”

And so *Le Livre de mon ami* marks still more clearly his revolt against science. “Our world is full of pharmacists who fear the imagination,” he cries, “and very mistaken they are. With all its falsehoods, it is imagination which sows all beauty, all virtue in the world. Only through it are we great. Oh mothers! have no fear that it will destroy your children! On the contrary it will keep them from vulgar faults and facile mistakes.”

Imagination is everything. “Not by the faculty of laughter does man rise above the animals, but by the gift of dreaming. The storyteller remakes the world after his own fashion, gives to lesser men, to the simple, to children, a chance to make it over in theirs. He helps man to imagine, to feel, and to love.”

“To know is nothing, to imagine is every-

thing," said the fairy of his dream to Sylvestre Bonnard. Now the same message is repeated, as Anatole France takes up the defense of fairy-tales in a Platonic dialogue completing *Le Livre de mon ami*. Indeed this chapter might serve as a preface to his collected tales. "Fairies exist precisely because they are imaginary," he declares; "liberty is an illusion and the fairy a reality." Then he goes on to show how these stories sprang from primitive man's religion—how the first myths, forgotten by men, survived on the lips of the grandmother spinning by the fireside—an eternal delight to the children of her child. So grand'mère herself became a myth, "la Mère l'Oie." And "La Reine Pédauque," represented on the portals of so many French churches, at Troyes, Dijon, and Nevers, is Mother Goose herself. So we are prepared for his own tales and the title of one of the best among them.

The poet in Anatole France has come to life again. Just completed, his first fairy-story *Abeille* indicates the part he has chosen. "For myself," he asserts in the last pages of *Le Livre de mon ami*, "I would gladly give a whole library of the philosophers rather than lose the fairy-tale *Peau d'âne*."



## CHAPTER IV

THE DREAMER OF THE PAST: EARLY TALES AND  
"THAIS" (1883-92).



#### IV

“IT is not science, it is poetry which charms and which consoles. That is why poetry is more necessary than science.” In the story of *Abeille* (1883) is found for a third time the text of the dialogue, with its poet’s protest against the stifling of childhood’s dreams. No, surely *Abeille* was “not meant for the rational souls who despise trifles and call for constant instruction.” Such a fairy-tale Perrault himself might have written, or Nodier told to his daughter by the evening fire. Like *Le Livre de mon ami*, *Abeille* springs from a scholar’s idealization of fatherhood; and so too do the nursery stories of *Nos Enfants* (1886), candid and idyllic as the pictures drawn for them by Boutet de Monvel.

Did these books turn the poet back to his art? Did the tiny heroine of *Abeille* charm him away from the uglier life of to-day? A little child shall lead them, even the misguided ones who



write of heroes like Jean Servien. At any rate, this charming tale gave its author new wings, and now for a decade he was to neglect the modern novel for the *conte* and the *causerie littéraire*.

His first sheaf of tales was gathered under the title *Balthasar* (1889). *Abeille* of course was included, but of the other stories only two are modern. And these get their plots from hypnotism and suggestion: Anatole France is still pursuing romance among the marvels of science. But the tale which gives its caption to the volume is made of Biblical figures: history and legend are ever drawing him more deeply into the past.

Balthasar is the pagan king of Ethiopia. He loves the queen of Sheba, that mysterious Balkis who, for us, lives on in the tales of Nodier and Nerval and *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*. He woos this languid beauty, protests his desire to serve, until she admits her one unsatisfied desire: "I should like to be afraid." Curious as the Roman ladies of the decadence, she longs to meet danger, to face the unknown, the terrors of the night and its mysterious qualms. So they seek adventure in the Queen's capital, their golden raiment doffed for beggar's garb.

"The night was black. Balkis was very tiny

in the night." Yet tiny as she is, the love of danger makes her brave, and she leads her lover to a pot-house of the slums. Here, in the company of porters and prostitutes, Balkis tastes the unknown savor of salt fish and onions. But having forgotten to bring money, they are set upon with threats and blows, and the King only wins their freedom by main force. Not until then does Balkis tell her burly champion that she loves him.

Balthasar has shed his blood for her. And he sheds it again before the adventure ends, and they are rescued from the brigands who find them sleeping in the hills. Struck down now in her defense, unconscious through days and nights of raving, he rises from his bed to find her closeted with a new lover, and to his mage he complains of the evils of this world. "Wisdom makes one happy," replies the astrologer, and the King sets out in search of wisdom.

He builds a tower to observe the stars, and then he knows the blessings of the sage. "While I am studying astronomy, I do not think of Balkis, nor of anything whatsoever. The sciences are useful; they keep men from thinking. Sembobitis, teach me the knowledge which destroys feeling in man, and I shall raise you in

honors among my people." So his mage instructs him in the secrets of the sky.

He learns how to draw horoscopes. At last he can draw them as well as Sembobitis himself. Has he discovered the way of truth? Are his predictions accurate? "Science is infallible," replies his teacher, "but scholars are constantly making mistakes." And Sembobitis denies the King's discovery, a new star, a wonderful new star which promises well for some unknown nativity.

Meanwhile Balkis learns that the King has forgotten her, and straightway knows that she loves him only. Dismissing her new lover, she sets out to find the old, and her camel-train winds its way across the desert sands toward the astronomer-king. From his tower he descries her, in all her beauty, but despite the terrible force that draws him earthward, he lifts his eyes again to the wonderful star, and it bids him follow its light to One who, in reward for his seeking, has promised him true riches and joy and love.

So he sets out to meet Gaspard and Melchior already on their way. Many days they follow the star, until it rests over the manger in Bethlehem. "And entering the dwelling, they found the Child with Mary His mother, and they

bowed down and worshiped Him; and offered Him gold and incense and myrrh, as it is related in the Gospel."

Certainly the claims of science are not taken very seriously in *Balthasar*. But the baldest parody of scholarship is reached in the next story, *Monsieur Pigeonneau*, an archeological fantasy such as Gautier loved. Monsieur Pigeonneau is a caricature of Sylvestre Bonnard, a Germanized savant who hates imagination as "the cruelest enemy of science." To this fatuous Dr. Dryasdust comes a charming American girl, seeking advice on the details of an Egyptian costume to wear at a ball. Then she asks him for a fairy-tale, adding, "What would be the use of science, if it didn't help you to write tales?" And the academician is forced to write it for her, hypnotized by the eyes of the Egyptian cat she has given him.

The other stories of the volume are of less importance. *L'oeuf rouge*, in which a neurasthenic goes mad because an anecdote from Lampridius has convinced him that he is a Roman emperor, recalls *Jocaste*. A blended texture of theology, occultism, and voluptuousness gives color to *La fille de Lilith*, the story of a preadamite maiden, whose prayer, "Promise me death that I may enjoy life, give me re-

morse that I may find pleasure," shows that Anatole France had not entirely forgotten Baudelaire and his breviary of Satanism. There is something of Gautier's fancy in this story of the deathless Leila; something of Gautier, too, in the tale of *Laeta Acilia*, a resurrection of Roman and Christian antiquity, contrasted as in *Arria Marcella*. Piquant and typical of the mixed ideals of our author is the apposition of these two worlds in the types he has chosen: the Roman senator's wife, rich, aristocratic, and contemptuous of this new religion of slaves, and the figure of Mary Magdalene, already used in a poem published in 1876—a sinner-saint like the heroine of his next volume.

This, of course, is the contrasted motif of *Les Noces corinthiennes*. But *Thaïs*, a year later, shows even better the conflict of interests which sways this intellectual Epicurean. Humanist and skeptic, a "pagan with a Catholic imagination," Anatole France now turned to that Alexandrian age whose poets had been his delight in days at school. From his boyhood on he had loved the *Lives of the Saints*, and at fifteen he had already written, as a school exercise, *La vie de Sainte-Radegonde*. The Christian anchorites had always fascinated this monk of letters, and now setting one of them against

the paganism of Alexandria, he limned a fresco full of contrasted and exotic color.

*Thaïs* is a legend retold, and gilded in the telling. Every one knows the story that Massenet has made into an opera. But the web of this fabric came from a library—from a medievalist's library. The original life of Paphnutius is a naïve Latin drama, written in the days of the Emperor Otto by a Saxon nun. Anatole France was deeply interested in this conventual blue-stocking and her miracle-plays: witness the pages on Hroswitha in the third volume of *La Vie littéraire*.

In this primitive miracle-play, *Thaïs* is a courtesan redeemed by a holy monk, who gains admittance to her in the guise of a lover—*sub specie amatoris*. In the version of Anatole France the anchorite pays the price of his conceit by yielding at last to a passionate love of his fair convert. The despiser of the flesh is conquered by the flesh: no penance and no discipline avail. Sinner is changed to saint and saint to sinner; Aphrodite is avenged, and the amiable skeptic who had voiced the fear of her resentment, Nicias the Cyrenaic, is seen to be the ideal of the author, an intellectual hedonist, an ironical dilettante of the senses and the arts.

Such is the simple fabric that Anatole France

has embroidered into *Thaïs*. But only an artist, with an artist's imagination and a painter's touch, could have clothed the rude skeleton of the legend with such living flesh. Only a great artist could have breathed into his Galatea the mingled fire and languor of this cultured and corrupted age, posed her against so rich a background—Alexandria with its shining roofs under a hot blue tropical sky, the yellow Nile and the Pyramids, and the desert dreaming its infinite dream before an unseeing Sphinx. Rich as Titian's or Tintoretto's pictures, and no less indifferent to Puritanism, *Thaïs* stands out like an oil-painting against the softer water-colors of *Les Noces corinthiennes*—similar in motif, but infinitely stronger in texture and impasto. It is a *conte philosophique*, like Voltaire's; a fresco filled with all the philosophies which flourished in the ancient world, before the scroll was erased and written over into the palimpsest of Christianity.

*Thaïs* is a pageant of metaphysics, a procession of the systems. Not one but has its advocate—as in *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*—at the symposium in the second chapter. And the discussion only ends when the Stoic, full of years and wisdom, dies conversing with his friends, a voluntary Socrates who might be suspected

of having read Marcus Aurelius. Yet if every attitude is presented in the story, it is really skepticism which prevails. The disciple of Pyrrho alone may accept equally all the philosophies, enjoy as poetry all these "sick men's dreams." "For the systems constructed by the sages are only tales invented to amuse the eternal childhood of man." They, too, are part of the *eternal flux*, seen differently by all the children of men. "The pyramids of Memphis seem, at daybreak, like cones of rosy light. At sunset they appear like black triangles against the flaming sky. But who shall penetrate their substance?"

Never, perhaps, was philosophic nihilism so beautifully arrayed. But poetry and philosophy are not so far apart, after all. The philosophy may be taken largely from a book on the Greek skeptics, as Anatole France admits in *La Vie littéraire*,<sup>1</sup> but the touch of the poet has transformed it, as Flaubert changed erudition to art in *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*.

Clearly, Flaubert served as model here, as he had done in parts of *Jocaste*. The *Tentation*, too, is a metaphysical and mystic orgy, a Satur-

<sup>1</sup> II, 134. Many realistic touches were also taken from Amélinot, *La Thébaïde*, reviewed by Anatole France about this time.



nalien revelry of philosophies. Here, too, we find the Gymnosophist of *Thaïs*, the comparison between Buddhism and Christianity, the opposition of the spirit and the flesh—that real struggle which, as a foil to the dilettantism of the banquet scene, completes the paradox of *Thaïs*. The setting of the final chapter, when the too heroic monk goes back to his desert and his new temptations, the Egyptian tomb with its wall-paintings, the monsters, the pack of jackals, are all reminiscent of Flaubert. The agonies of Saint Anthony fall also upon Paphnuce, but in his case the cross does not conquer at the end. Too blind to see the salvation offered to his soul in useful labor, the monk vainly carries his temptations to a pillar and thence to a desert tomb: now he cannot distinguish the voice of the Devil from the voice of God. Vain, too, his final yielding to the hopes of life and love so long despised, since he reaches his convert only to see her die, a saint, while her sisters in piety drive him away from the body as if he were a vampire.

Christianity had triumphed over paganism in *Les Noces corinthiennes*. In *Thaïs* the pagan spirit triumphs in its turn. One other standpoint remained, to show the new faith ignored by the old, insignificant and virtually non-

existent in a mightier social and religious order. This point of view is vividly presented in *Le procureur de Judée*.

The story is found in *L'Etui de nacre*, published two years later (1892). None of the tales is so faultless in technique, none so characteristic of Anatole France in its psychological insight and atmosphere. A touch of his magician's wand, and we see Baïæ of old—a marble city bathed by a sapphire sea. We walk the vine-clad hills above the town, watch the meeting of Lælius Lamia and his old friend Pontius Pilatus, hear their reminiscences at the dinner in the villa, sympathize with the former procurator, now deprived of his province, in the unmerited disgrace which has fallen upon him after a lifetime devoted to the Empire. More than this, we share his resentment at the cause of his ruin, the obstinate cringing fanatic race which had refused his aqueducts and opposed his justice and zeal in their behalf.

Then the two friends speak of the religion of the Jews. Half mockingly, Lamia remarks that some day the Jewish Jupiter may find a place in the Pantheon of Rome. Pilate smiles, convinced that a people still quarreling over its dogmas cannot impose them upon the outside world. He recalls to Lamia the mad intolerance

of the Jews, their zeal in persecuting heretics, their constant appeals to him for the death of the unorthodox. Forced as a Roman executive to sanction their decrees, unable to make them tolerant and reasonable in matters of religion, he has had his very justice made the basis of complaints to the proconsul, so that in the end he has lost his province thereby. And he concludes from such unreason that the Jews must be destroyed.

Lamia tries to calm his virtuous wrath. He speaks of the simple hearts he has found among this people, of the heroic heretics he has seen die for a cause. For he too has lived in Judea, Pilate's guest for many years, after his indiscretions had banished him from Rome. Then he praises the beauty of their women, while Pontius blames him for a conduct which has given no children to the State. Yet Lamia continues, vaunting the grace of the Syrian dancers, like the voluptuary he is, until he comes to mention an old love—a girl who left him to join the band of a young Galilean thaumaturge, Jesus of Nazareth. And he asks Pilate if he remembers this man, put to death for some forgotten cause.

Pilate knits his brows. Then, after some moments of silence he replies:

“Jesus? Jesus of Nazareth? I don’t recollect him.”

And so the story leaves you. It is a perfect climax, disconcerting but inevitable. It concentrates a whole age of history in a single phrase: and that phrase reveals and intensifies the picture behind it like a flash of lightning. What more could be said? When we recover from the shock of this white magic, we can only wonder at the sorcerer who summoned the vision from the fumes of false historical interpretation.

To formulate the psychology of the past—that is the special insight given to Anatole France. He reads the Roman mind; he reads, too, the souls in which the seeds of Christianity were first sown. After Pontius Pilate, a splendid foil, *L’Etui de nacre* gives us the stories of *Amycus et Célestin*, of *Sainte Oliverie et Sainte Liberette*, of *Sainte Euphrosine, Scolastica*, and *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame*. What a vision of the early Christians and the Middle Ages in the candor of these legends retold! Free from irony or philosophic intention, such richly illuminated pages defy analysis. One must read them in order to feel their qualities, delicate as the work of a Fra Angelico in prose.

Nor is there need to relate the anecdotes of

the French Revolution which make the last half of the volume a promise of *Les Dieux ont soif*. *Mémoires d'un volontaire* is a literary mosaic, made up, as the author tells us, of real happenings in the eighteenth century, while some of the other tales are borrowed from anecdotes first told in *Le Livre de mon ami*.<sup>2</sup> The physician who neglected the sick dauphin in order to care for a peasant woman in childbirth, the aristocrat who hid a refugee between the mattresses of her bed, the fatal love-letters thrust under a sofa when the patriots surprise Milady in her task of destruction, reappear in *L'aube*, *Madame de Luzy*, and *Le petit soldat de plomb*. As we have seen before, Anatole France is fond of quoting himself. But criticism is disarmed when, at the end of the last episode, the author states his belief "that he has already heard that story somewhere," and we turn back indulgently to the earlier version, wondering if it is truth or poetry. Did these things really happen to his eighteenth-century grandmother, and did her unwritten memoirs inspire in the grandson his interest in the French Revolution?

However that may be, the stories bear the stamp of historical truth. The imagination of Anatole France was quick to catch the generous

<sup>2</sup> *Loc. cit.*, pp. 89-94.

ardor behind the first Revolutionary dream of equality. The hopes of 1789—with the Bastille destroyed and the Golden Age brought back to earth—that vision of fraternity which only too soon degenerated into suspicion and denunciation—how all this age of idealism lives again for us, relieved against the prison and the awful shadow of the guillotine! He loves this *ancien régime*, with its Epicurean poise, its irony and its quiet heroism, and when he depicts a *grande dame* renouncing her hope of love and freedom to save a turnkey's daughter (*La victime volontaire*), one can see his native sympathy for the culture of the eighteenth century, the last flower of a forgotten chivalry and an outworn Renaissance.

"I love the things of days gone by and I like to live in the company of the dead," says this scholar-poet. And we may add with him, "Who of us does not like to live in the past? Who of us does not sometimes feel the need of it? It would be too little to live in the present, for the present is but a point that flees incessantly." So Anatole France wrote his tales of other times, finding in them not merely the joys of a scholar and an antiquarian, but the door which best offered an escape from unromantic reality, from the dull prose of a scientific and

materialistic age. It is a dream-country to which he carries us in these vivid fables, a strand far from the barren factory-dotted landscape of the present—Rome or Alexandria, the naïve age of faith, the fiery Renaissance, or the stirring days of the Revolution. But by its definition the tale must transport the reader to the land of dreams.

Anatole France takes us there in a magic boat. There are none who may not embark, set sail with him for enchanted seas. None will fail to see how a real vision inspired these voyages, but only the scholar, conscious of his sources, will know the toil which built the fairy-ship or freighted it for our delight. For the author himself is speaking in the confession of Jacques Tournebroche: "Like Aulus Gellius, who brought together the finest pages of the philosophers in his *Attic Nights*, like Apuleius who put into his *Metamorphoses* the best of the fables of the Greeks, I give myself the labors of the honey-bee in order to distil a nectar divine."

## CHAPTER V

THE MONK OF LETTERS: CRITICISM AND THE  
REACTION TO LIFE (1887-92).



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AFTER the story, we turn again to the story-teller. Books like these, certainly, are only born in a poet's mind. None but a poet could have dreamed Thaïs and the desert and the Nile, and the white city by the inland sea. Only a poet could have lived again in sympathy the lives of the saints, thrilled to the mingled horror and heroism of the Revolution, seen in Pontius Pilate the spirit of a world-empire. But to realize these dreams of a dead past, to make them vivid and clear and convincing as a modern novel, took something more than mere imagination. Call it clairvoyance if you will; clairvoyance of this sort is really historical insight based on critical scholarship. The story-teller is a poet, but he is also the subtlest of critics.

Too subtle, perhaps, for great lyricism. In any case, one may catch too early the trick of rationalizing emotion. If *Le Livre de mon ami*

is a confession, this sensitive boy needed no priestly training to show him how to apply dialectics to experience.

Let us go back to his literary beginnings. Naturally, the poet found expression first. But as we have seen, verse was not his only interest: even in his Parnassian days, his other talent was leading him to biography. As early as 1868, he had made his study of Alfred de Vigny, and Lemerre had given him the editorship of a series of French classics. So he wrote the lives of many a favorite author, now collected and reprinted in *Génie latin* (1913). In 1874, he had published the first of these interesting studies, *Racine*; in 1877, *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre*, *L'Abbé Prévost*, and *Molière*; in 1878, *Le Sage*; in 1879, *Marguerite de Navarre*, *Sainte-Beuve*, and *Chateaubriand*. From 1881 to 1890 his growing success as a novelist reduced the list to *Scarron*, *Madame de la Fayette*, *La Fontaine*, and *Benjamin Constant*. *Théocrite*, which has the place of honor in the collection, dates from 1896, when his labors as *préfacier* were almost over.

It is well to have these juvenilia collected and reprinted. They are the beginnings of the critic who, for good or evil, broke the last bonds of criticism. If not scholarly biographies, per-

haps, contemptuous of all but documentary proofs, they are real portraits; and when detail is slurred, it is to give greater truth of color and atmosphere. Being an artist rather than a scholar, the author finds the date less important than the adjective. More than this, he recognizes the limits of his canvas. To know the scholar's labors and to know when to forget them is the mark of the true humanist, and no other may wield a pen at all comparable to the sword.

A little tact is not useless in the critic's trade. And Anatole France had more than a little. He knew that he was writing for the greater public, for those who usually neglect prefaces, and he hoped he was writing to be read. He must divine his audience—possible readers of his future novels—avoid equally the steeps of pedantry and the shoals of platitude. He must charm, and he had not yet learned the secret of charming by holding up the mirror to his changing moods. Ten, fifteen years younger than the critic of *La Vie littéraire*, he feels that he must take his subject seriously, yet he does find the secret of charming in a sympathetic touch and in lively contrasts of characteristic background or pose.

It is sympathy which makes the portrait live.

It is sympathy which leads the artist to the heart of his model. So this young critic turns instinctively to types like himself. First he takes up his favorite Racine, and the portrait is rich in glimpses of the artist who drew it. With Racine, Anatole France knew "the charms of a pious education for the ardent young souls that it does not stifle"; he too had known the malady of the cloister, its dangerous gift of intermingling life and dreams, to lose oneself therein.<sup>1</sup> But when he adds that religion offers to voluptuous souls "*la volupté de se perdre*," we realize suddenly that this gentle classicist is also an admirer of Baudelaire!

The 'prentice critic finds it hard not to read himself into his model. Be the subject well chosen, his own experience serves as a divining-rod. So for Anatole France there is no contradiction in the mocking sallies of *le tendre Racine*: "The same nervous sensibility which excites one to weep at many things provokes laughter at many others."<sup>2</sup> With Racine, he had thrilled in boyhood to the beauty of the classics; he too had known the visions which float through a poet's soul before the words come to set them free.<sup>3</sup> And in spite of all his self-suppression in these studies, which were

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

written at the same time as his early essays in naturalistic fiction, Anatole France already declares that what we love and value in others is "only the points of relationship which bind them to ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

Thus he foreshadows the subjective critic of *La Vie littéraire*. The later digressions may be lacking, but never the tender irony, the playful grace and wit that mark the personal attitude. He frankly admits that he has not read a serious work of Prévost, *Le Monde moral*; but his portrait of the soldier-abbé and defrocked Bohemian does not suffer by the omission. Naturally, the future creator of Jérôme Coignard will see the picturesque in such a man: he will like to explore that heart divided between the love of religion and the loves of this world. No one could be more clever in his setting of the background, as when he begins a study of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre by a swift sketch of his native seaport, or relieves a portrait of Chateaubriand against a sombre Breton landscape of barren heath and donjon and never silent sea. No one quicker to see the universal humanity in his sitters, or to illustrate a modern text from the golden stores of the Greeks. And if he cannot resist the

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

temptation of an occasional quaint archaism, he knows that to be truly classic one must be simple and natural. "Ce n'est pas en faisant du grec qu'on ressemble le plus aux Grecs." He will be himself, and it is not Molière nor Scarron nor Le Sage, but the poets Racine, Sainte-Beuve, and Chateaubriand whose portraits stir him to freest self-expression.

"The works that are least vain were created by those who best saw the vanity of all things. One must pay for the pride of thinking in sadness and desolation."<sup>5</sup> This is found in the essay on Racine. Thus the very first of these studies, dating from 1874, reflects the earlier, essential Anatole France, the seeker disillusioned and bitter, before he has taken disillusion for a mask. This is our skeptic at thirty, judging his youth's attempt to solve the riddle of the universe by nineteenth-century science and eighteenth-century philosophy. When, thirteen years later, he replaced Jules Claretie as literary critic of *Le Temps*, he had learned, like Montaigne, how easy it was to sleep in peace on the pillow of doubt—and even to dream delightfully upon it. He had become the "mocking Benedictine" of his editor's fancy, a philosophic monk of a dilettante Abbey of

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Thelema, indulgent and pious, skeptical yet resigned, bound to the *status quo* by pessimism and esthetic dislike of change. Sylvestre Bonnard, the scholar who had used books to escape from the present, "for every age is commonplace to those who live in it," now opened his study window.

Hence the four volumes of *La Vie littéraire* (1888-1892), made up of these weekly chats on books and men and events. No dry reviewing this, but scholarship on a holiday, familiar and genial, yet rich in many a philosophic vista. Like the Lady of Shalott, the student of the past views in art's mirror the reflected life of to-day, and this partial approach to reality seems only to confirm him in his Pyrrhonism. Half a dozen years older, he is no longer the optimist Sylvestre. He is Renan in his last stage, tired of serious scholarship and amusing himself with ideas. Ernest Renan, "le plus sage des hommes," is now his master, and if we turn back three years to *Le Livre de mon ami*, we shall find, in a dialogue directly imitated from *Dialogues philosophiques*, the very spirit of Renan's final dilettantism: "I shall mingle in one love the two children of my thought, so as not to do injury to my real son."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 285.



Add to this his very evident admiration for the great modern relativist, Montaigne,<sup>7</sup> and you have his exemplars during the six years of reading which prepared him for *La Vie littéraire*.

What is this dilettantism? It is, for Anatole France, "le don de s'amuser de soi-même." It is intellectual Epicureanism: "one wearies of everything except the joys of comprehending." It is a religion of universal curiosity, spiced by erudition and guided by taste. Skeptical of absolute values, it accepts the game of thought for the game's sake, and it builds no philosophic system. Hence its inconsistencies, its contradictions: since those who follow the great god Mood must, like Montaigne, possess two or three philosophies. "Woe unto him who does not contradict himself at least once a day," had said Renan. Anatole France will say, in the Preface to his second volume, "I am afraid of absolutely logical souls."<sup>8</sup>

Breadth extended even to inconsistency will hardly be dogmatic. So this critic builds no theory of esthetics. Artist that he is, compelled to choose because all art is selective, he does not exalt his personal preferences into a

<sup>7</sup> *Vie litt.*, III, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> "Les âmes exemptes de tout illogisme me font peur."

theory. "I believe that we shall never know," says he in a preface, "exactly why a thing is beautiful." To him, "Beauty is a part of the universal illusion. It is the eye of man which creates the beauty of the heavens and the earth. We confer beauty upon things by loving them; love contains all the mystery of the ideal. But, idealists or realists, we are all alike the play-things of appearances. . . . Beauty is the only reality we are permitted to seize."

We think at once of Plato's *Protagoras*. But all the philosophers are known to this destroyer of philosophy. The very procession of the world-systems has made him more skeptical: in philosophy too, as in the things about him, he sees only relativity and change. And yet he loves philosophy as the history of man's thought, loves it as a scholar and a humanist. For him as for Pascal, "thought is man in his entirety," the source of his dignity and the secret of his despair.<sup>9</sup> He loves it also as a master of dialectics, as we may see in his essay on Jules Lemaitre, and for Anatole France thought is philosophic doubt.

Let us see what he has to say of his fellow Renanist Lemaitre—and incidentally of himself. "His fortunate perversity," reads the

<sup>9</sup> III, 69.

essay, "consists in doubting incessantly. 'Tis the condition to which reflection has reduced him. Thought is a frightful thing. It is the acid which dissolves the universe, and if all men were set to thinking at once, the world would immediately cease to exist. But this misfortune is not to be feared. Thought is the worst of things. It is also the best, for if it is true to say that it destroys everything, one can also say that it has created all things. Only through it do we conceive the universe, and when it demonstrates to us that the universe is inconceivable, it does but shatter the bubble it has blown."<sup>10</sup>

How all this recalls the *Dialogues philosophiques*! Only Renan, surely, could keep his paradoxes dancing so skilfully upon thin air. Only Renan, before him, could blow them so rich in color and beauty, yet light as thistle-down. To juggle with ultimate things like silver balls—Renan alone had done that: now that skill is shared by Anatole France and by his mocking Cyrenaic Nicias, whose incarnation, in *Thaïs*, dates from this very year (1889).

So from Nicias's creator we can expect nothing but subjective criticism. "As I understand it," he says in his first Preface, "criticism, like

<sup>10</sup> II, 173.

philosophy or history, is a kind of novel for the use of curious or discreet minds, and every novel, correctly speaking, is an autobiography. The good critic is the one who relates the adventures of his soul in the midst of masterpieces." For Anatole France, indeed, objective criticism is as impossible as objective art, since we are all of us prisoned in self, unable to escape from our personalities. Better admit the fact then, if we speak at all; to be perfectly frank, the critic should say: "Gentlemen, I am going to speak of myself in connection with Shakespeare, Racine, or Goethe. 'Tis a rather fine opportunity."

Was this denial of objective truth meant for a challenge? At any rate it had the effect of one, and the glove cast down by Renan's brilliant disciple was picked up by the sturdiest intellectual son of Taine. To name Brunetière is to describe his rejoinder, delivered in the classic pages of *La Revue des Deux-Mondes* (January 1, 1891). Mentor, after his long labors in critical scholarship, of that bulwark of literary conservatism, a humanist armed with all the sledges of dialectics, Brunetière did his best to crush this dangerous butterfly, this dilettante whose sophistries were apparently aimed at scholarship itself. But the ham-

mers only swung in empty air. Brunetière's attempt to refute the subjectivity of knowledge was hardly more successful than those of all the philosophers before him, and over the ruins of his logic the butterfly hovers still.

Our concern moreover is with the butterfly. Let us keep the image, for it alone translates the volatile grace of these literary chats. Such might be the essays of Montaigne reincarnate, a Montaigne turned *chroniqueur parisien*. Like him, like Elia too, Anatole France follows his fancy where it listeth: "je cause, et la causerie a ses hasards." So perfectly natural does it seem that at first one is more than half deceived. None the less, chance is not master here. Well does this critic know what he would say—or leave unsaid! He may say it naïvely, but *ars est celare artem*. He always says it simply, with a grace borrowed from antiquity. True to his mentor Voltaire, he never forgets that he is writing for the larger public, and these years of newspaper work will do much to make his prose vivid and supple and sure.

His method—but that may best be left to his own words. Renan had just published a volume of his great history, the task of a lifetime. Remember Anatole France was speaking of the

work of a master—of his own master. And here is his introduction:

“Must I try to describe for you the impression I felt in reading this second volume of *The History of Israel*? Must I show you my mood (‘l’état de mon âme’) while I was dreaming from page to page? ’Tis a sort of criticism for which I have only too much inclination, as you know. When I have told what I have felt, I can hardly ever say more, and all my art is scribbling on the margins of books. A leaf turned over is like a torch put in my hand; it sets to dancing twenty butterflies which spring from my brain. . . . If I drive them away, others come, and they seem to murmur with their beating wings: ‘We are little Psyches. . . . we too are seeking Eros, the secret of life and of death.’ And finally it is always one of these little Psyches who writes my article for me! How she manages, Heaven knows, but without her I should do far worse.”<sup>11</sup>

And what the little Psyches bring him now, after a descriptive paragraph based on his reverie over Renan’s masterpiece, is the memory of his mother’s Bible, with its seventeenth-century woodcuts, and these occupy him almost to the exclusion of the book he is set to review.

<sup>11</sup> II, 317.

So for Anatole France criticism becomes a marginal note. It is a gloss; a gloss creative as the text it adorns. *La Vie littéraire* is a *journal intime* of literary impressions, of general ideas—"it is so agreeable to philosophize." It is a portrait of the artist; and if he has no systematic "tendency," tendencies he certainly has. Breadth first, for "one has less chance of being absolutely mistaken when one admires things which are very diverse."<sup>12</sup> Yet he insists upon style, the simple style of the Greeks, and he hates neologism and *Goncourisme* as he hates the platitudes of Georges Ohnet or the monstrous rhetoric of Victor Hugo. For Anatole France, as for his beloved eighteenth century, taste is the first canon of literature: "Without taste, one shocks even those who have none."<sup>13</sup> So he likes the tale better than the novel,<sup>14</sup> and confesses "a secret preference for little masterpieces."<sup>15</sup> Taste means restraint: "To tell everything is to tell nothing."<sup>16</sup> Taste means beauty, and "in art everything which is not beautiful is false."<sup>17</sup> Hence his chief abomination is naturalism, and nothing could be finer than the conclusion of his study of Zola,<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> I, 99.<sup>14</sup> IV, 319.<sup>16</sup> I, 78.<sup>18</sup> I, 236.<sup>13</sup> I, 17.<sup>15</sup> I, 150.<sup>17</sup> I, 79.

which shows us that even a skeptic may have ideals:

"There is in all of us. . . . an instinct for beauty, a desire for all that adorns and beautifies, which, diffused throughout the world, makes the charm of life. Monsieur Zola does not know it. In some hearts desire and modesty are mingled in charming nuances. Monsieur Zola does not know it. There are on earth shapes grandly fair and noble thoughts; there are pure souls and heroic hearts. Monsieur Zola does not know it. Many a weakness even, many an error and fault has its touching beauty. Grief is sacred: the holiness of tears lies at the base of all religions. Unhappiness alone would be enough to make man august to man. Monsieur Zola does not know it. He does not know that the Graces are modest, that philosophic irony is indulgent and mild; and that human affairs inspire in noble hearts only two feelings, admiration or pity. Monsieur Zola is worthy of profound pity."

Thus ended the review of *La Terre*. Not one digression in this richly deserved critique, and even an etymologist could call it one! But only two years later, when the bankruptcy of naturalism was assured, we find Anatole France speaking generously for masterpieces like *Ger-*



*minal*,<sup>19</sup> whose epic force had impressed him through all his Hellenism. This recognition occurred long before the personal *rapprochement* of the Dreyfus affair.

Of course his antipathy to Zola's naturalism is what we should expect of a poet. Classic naturalism, so finely wrought out in the seventeenth century, he accepts as a humanist, and he loves and strives for the classical ideal of form. Yet by his feelings he leans to the romantic—and openly avows it. "Despite all our attempts to be reasonable and to love only the truth, there are times when common reality ceases to satisfy—when one would like to escape from Nature."<sup>20</sup> As Poe had said, anywhere out of the world! So Anatole France will explore the cosmos in search of the marvelous—which he knows does not exist!—and is never happier than when illuminating some miracle of popular legend or medieval hagiology or modern spiritism. With the same romantic curiosity he will ransack the sciences, choosing of course writers "fond of those generalizations from which a curious mind can draw immediate pleasure and profit."<sup>21</sup> How often, for instance, will his restless imagination

<sup>19</sup> III, 371.

<sup>20</sup> I, 117.

<sup>21</sup> IV, 350.

find in the marvels of astronomy a new thrill and a new metaphor!

So might one plunder all the universe to store a Palace of Art. But our skeptic knows that "everything in this world must be paid for, and pleasure most of all."<sup>22</sup> Before the end of the second volume, we find hints of a reaction, a growing desire to quit his ivory tower. Take the page in which he depicts the farmers winnowing wheat—a page worthy to set beside the classic prologue of *La Mare au diable*, and mark the ending: "Oh the joy of accomplishing a fixed and regular task! Shall I know, to-night, whether I have brought home to my granary the good grain? Shall I know whether my words are the bread which giveth life?"<sup>23</sup>

There is, then, an ideal of truth, an ideal for life, unknown to him though it be. And now, in the last two volumes of *La Vie littéraire*, a new note enters, despite the rather significant fact that *personalia* come less readily to his pen. This note is first struck in the review of Bourget's *Le Disciple*.<sup>24</sup> Here, Anatole France vehemently defends the right of the thinker to a free expression of his thought, regardless of any practical or moral consequences. "It is

<sup>22</sup> I, 255.

<sup>23</sup> II, 254.

<sup>24</sup> III, 54.

thought which rules the world," he avers, "yesterday's ideas make the morals of to-morrow." And if he still loves his skeptical poise, still believes with Montaigne that "to die for an idea is to set a pretty high value on conjectures," none the less he does virtually deny his old quietism in this statement: "Whoever thinks he possesses the truth must declare it."<sup>25</sup> He knows, now, that "life is not innocent," as he had hoped it might be, that "we live only by devouring life"; nay, that even "thought is an act which partakes of the cruelty inherent in every act."<sup>26</sup> And not many weeks after comes the realization that, even for a hedonist, passivity is death. Reviewing the career of a forgotten connoisseur, Vivant Denon, he tells us that "*la mollesse est l'ennemie des vraies voluptés*";<sup>27</sup> discovers, even more significantly, "the defect of that fortunate career" in Denon's refusal to allow himself "to take up arms in any cause."

It is clear that these two essays mark the turning-point in the development of Anatole France. He had been one of those described in his first Preface, one "for whom the universe is only ink and paper." Now, his window open

<sup>25</sup> III, 62.

<sup>26</sup> III, 73.

<sup>27</sup> III, 179.

on the present, a living breeze has destroyed his quiet and his quietism. So the last two volumes of the essays show him denying his old gods, admitting new deities into his Pantheon. A former Parnassian, he now derides "art for art's sake," contending that "poetry should spring up naturally out of life, like a flower or tree."<sup>28</sup> He admits, with restrictions, the new prosody of Jean Moréas, after bantering the symbolists in the Preface to his second volume! He proposes for the Collège de France chairs of telepathy, socialism, and physical astronomy—to study the canals of Mars.<sup>29</sup> He rallies the medievalist Péladan on his hatred of patriotism and his disgust for the present.<sup>30</sup> He mocks at the experimental subjectivism of Barrès, the budding *député*, maintaining that "we must not make life an experiment, we must live it."<sup>31</sup> For the third time he returns to the defense of popular writing: "We must keep our minds wide open to life and ideas."<sup>32</sup> And finally, in the last volume, he comes out boldly for the present against the past, affirming that "never has there been an age more interesting to the curious mind, except perhaps the age of Hadrian."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> III, 305.<sup>29</sup> IV, 58.<sup>30</sup> III, 235.<sup>31</sup> IV, 229.<sup>32</sup> IV, 184.<sup>33</sup> IV, 165.

With all this his pessimism increases through these later volumes. No illusion gilds for him the present, as it had glorified that Palace of Art where his skepticism had found peace in books and in "the silent orgies of thought." He knows this world of ours for the drop of mud that it is; realizes that even the physical universe offers no hope of better things.<sup>34</sup> He finds it horrible to think that children will become men,<sup>35</sup> sees that the unchanging base of human nature is "tenaciously selfish, jealous, sensual, and cruel."<sup>36</sup> He even wonders, at times, whether life is not an accident, a mould, a planetary disease.<sup>37</sup> And believing all this, disillusioned in his hopes of science,<sup>38</sup> in his belief in history,<sup>39</sup> conscious of the sadness of the everlasting flux,<sup>40</sup> knowing that in much wisdom is much grief, he asks himself every evening with the Preacher,<sup>41</sup> "What profit hath a man of all the labour which he laboureth under the sun?" Yet through it all he retains his confidence in the reason, in that curious eighteenth century which, believing in progress won through reason, inaugurated a new era for

<sup>34</sup> III, 212.

<sup>35</sup> IV, 48.

<sup>36</sup> IV, 43,

<sup>40</sup> IV, 10.

<sup>35</sup> III, 271.

<sup>37</sup> IV, 229.

<sup>39</sup> II, 116.

<sup>41</sup> II, 31.

humanity.<sup>42</sup> Only his first trust is now tempered by experience, by the realization that "things do not move so quickly as we used to think." Convinced, now, that "one must follow circumstances, use the forces about us, do in a word what we find to do,"<sup>43</sup> this defender of truth in the abstract is only waiting for the hour and the call. The critic who, in the Preface of four years before, had "blessed books because they made of life a long and gentle childhood," is ready for his anticlerical campaign. Five years more, and he will fight side by side with Zola in the defense of Dreyfus.

<sup>42</sup> IV, 43.

<sup>43</sup> III, 348.

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## CHAPTER VI

**THE DISCIPLE OF VOLTAIRE: THE ABBE JEROME  
AND FRA GIOVANNI (1893-95).**





## VI

“ONE tires of everything, even of correcting proof-sheets.” In 1892, Anatole France gave up his regular contributions to *Le Temps*, and his later occasional work in this field is still uncollected. After all, literary journalism had been mainly a pleasant by-path for his curiosity, since the years from 1888 to 1892 had also produced *Balthazar*, *Thaïs*, and *L'Etui de nacre*. Henceforth, he was to make fiction the vehicle of his criticism of life.

The by-path merges into the highway with *L'Etui de nacre*, synchronous with the last volume of essays. Six stories in that collection were staged against a Revolutionary setting. From the drama back to the comedy which preceded it—from 1789 to his beloved *ancien régime*—was no long step for one who so admired the prose of Voltaire and the liberal thought of the eighteenth century. Hence his next book, a sort of *conte philosophique*, racy as

*Candide* and filled with reminiscences of its characters and its style.

*La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque* purports to be an eighteenth-century memoir, written by the student Jacques Tournebroche. His father it is who keeps the cook-shop of Queen Web-foot, with its painted signboard symbolic of Mother Goose,—a redolent hospitable hearth where gather the chief characters of the story. Here we find the Abbé Jérôme Coignard, humanist and Bohemian, unctuous and genially disreputable, who, for a daily meal, consents to instruct young Jacques in the humanities. Hither comes the strange figure of the Marquis d'Astarac, an adept of alchemy and the Rosy Cross, to point out in the flaming fireplace a salamander suspiciously like Cellini's vision—sure portent, to him, of a mystic's destiny. So Astarac takes Jacques and his master into his service, and sets them to work in his library to translate Greek manuscripts, while he in his laboratory seeks the philosopher's stone and the secret of life. In this temple of learning they meet the Rabbi Mosaïde, who, after sixty years of study in the Great Pyramid, explores for the alchemist the lore of the Hebrews and the Egyptians: there, too, they meet Jahel, the old Jew's lovely niece. How Jacques mistakes her

for the sylph promised him by Astarac, how he wins her love and loses it to a young nobleman, how student and master are obliged to flee Paris with the lovers because their drunken revel has ended in unintentional homicide, and how at last the beloved Abbé, struck down in purblind jealousy by Mosaïde, expiates his crime by a Christian death—all this must be left to the sprightly pages of the story,—a masterpiece, although not *virginibus puerisque*. Lovers of Voltaire will certainly not object to the necessity of seeking the original.

*La Rôtisserie* is a tale of the marvelous—a romance of alchemy and Rosicrucian philosophy. Pope had used the same theme to furnish the mythology of *The Rape of the Lock*. He says in his Preface:

“The Rosicrucians are a people I must bring you acquainted with. The best account I know of them is in a French book called *Le comte de Gabalis*. . . . According to these gentlemen, the four elements are inhabited by spirits, which they call sylphs, gnomes, nymphs, and salamanders. The gnomes, or demons of earth, delight in mischief; but the sylphs, whose habitation is in the air, are the best-conditioned creatures imaginable; for they say any mortals may enjoy the most intimate familiarities with

these gentle spirits, upon a condition very easy to all true adepts, an inviolate preservation of chastity."

Like Alexander Pope, Anatole France found in *Le comte de Gabalis* his principal source.<sup>1</sup> He knew this contemporary satire of the Rosicrucians in the fascinating *Voyages imaginaires* (1788), for Monsieur d'Astarac is sketched after the frontispiece. In the same volume, too, may be found an *Amant salamandre*; in the next one, Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux*. But more to us than these details is the romantic curiosity which led a skeptic to the choice of such a subject: far more significant is his interest in the scientific possibility of invisible beings, here or on other planets, already noted in a certain page of *La Vie littéraire*.<sup>2</sup> For a poet-skeptic, fascinated by the supernatural, "to believe nothing is to believe everything"—in the realm of art!

But it took a poet, with all his imagination and candor, to limn the rational madness of the alchemist, despite the cosmic curiosity and naïve faith in science which make of him, in a way, an earlier portrait of Anatole France. Candor alone could have depicted the simple

<sup>1</sup> *La Grande Revue*, Nov. 25, 1911.

<sup>2</sup> I, 186.

Jacques, and especially the pupil's portrait of his friend and master Jérôme Coignard. The Abbé Coignard is of course the center of the story—a mellow rascal who through all his lapses never loses our sympathy. In his favorite book-shop or in his favorite tavern, translating Zosimus or mingling potations with philosophy, he is always genial; he may break a wine-flask over a lackey's head, but when he repents of this moment of violence he is, as always, the imperturbable sage, and not even the accusation of cheating at cards can shake his poise or spoil his subtly intellectual charm. We love him for his humanity, for the humanities whose grace he breathes, and no scene in the book is more ludicrously typical than the one where Abbé Jérôme, who has fought like a layman in the brawl ending a Bacchic symposium, is found sitting on the wet margin of a street fountain, cursing the moon for her stingy light, as he seeks for an appropriate text in his pocket edition of *De Consolatione Philosophiae*!

Of course the Abbé Jérôme is the mouth-piece of his "only true begetter." Even the disguise is significant, for who can sketch a rascal or a vagabond so well as your cloistered scholar? Intellectually, Jérôme Coignard is

Anatole France, a mask of philosophic disenchantment—Epicurus with the heart of a Saint Francis. He too is a skeptic in practical life, "with a marvelous leaning toward doubt which inclines him to mistrust even common sense." He too is a rationalist, for churchman that he is, he "rejects everything contrary to reason except in matters of faith," and when he adds that "here one must believe blindly," we can see that Anatole France is attacking dogma after the manner of Peter Bayle in his great *Dictionary*.

After dogma, Christian morality has its turn. "Like crows, virtue makes its nest in ruins," observes the good Abbé. "I have only succeeded in smuggling virtue into myself through the breaches made in my constitution by suffering and age. And every time I tried it, too, my spirit was puffed up far less with virtue than with pride. So I keep making to the Creator this prayer: 'God, keep me from virtue, if it withdraw me from holiness.' Ah holiness, that is the thing we can and must attain! There is our true goal. May we reach it some day! In the meantime, more wine!"

Now the purpose of the novel is revealed. It is—rather surprisingly in the tolerant skeptic of the essays—a subtle but violent anticlerical-

ism. To contrast the fixity of dogma with the experimentalism of a pioneer in chemistry is not enough for Anatole France; he must bring together faith and skepticism in the same person. To be sure he had known a priest of that type, if we may believe a page in the second volume of *La Vie littéraire*<sup>3</sup>—a cleric to whom “everything except revelation was subject to doubt.” He had been attacked by the Jesuits—*les petits pères*, and had answered them ironically and suavely, on page two hundred and thirty-seven of the third volume. But this is not his real motive: the first reaction of an exasperated dilettantism must be, inevitably, a revulsion against the rigors of dogma and the folly of the ascetic ideal.

Turn back again to the last volume of the essays. Just such a reaction is presented there, in the essay on Blaise Pascal. To Anatole France, skeptic and Epicurean, Pascal is a “fanatic”: a zealot who neglected all the humanities of life, who “despised all the arts, even that of writing,” who lived in filth, found sensuality in the simplest gastronomic appreciation, “rejoiced at the death of his relatives, if only that death were Christian.” With all this Pascal “kept his religion and his philosophy in

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 126.



watertight compartments," fearing that reason might enter by surprise into the things of faith.

Well! Isn't the last trait parodied for us in the religion of Jérôme Coignard? This rationalist, who despises the vulgar prejudice consecrated in human codes, "adores divine law even in its absurdities, which wound our reason only because they are above it."<sup>4</sup> And Anatole France is evidently following *Les Lettres provinciales* in the casuistry of the good Abbé, who believes that the greatest sinners make the greatest saints, since a moment of contrition can change years of transgression into holiness.<sup>5</sup> To use this as a justification of evil is sufficient proof of satiric intention.

In externals, of course, Coignard resembles our old friend Abbé Prévost or the Pangloss of *Candide*. But in spirit he is a new Anatole France, influenced now by Voltaire rather than Renan. Like Voltaire, Jérôme and his creator both believe in reason; both champion that free spirit of inquiry which alone strips respectability from old abuses.<sup>6</sup> So the author soon added to *La Rôtisserie* a companion volume, *Les opinions de Monsieur Jérôme Coignard*, declaring:<sup>7</sup> "It is useful to wield the broom a bit

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>6</sup> *Opinions*, p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

wildly in the dark corners. . . . Things unjust or foolish or cruel do not strike us as familiar: we see the faults of our ancestors and not our own." Thus, according to the fictitious editor, *Les Opinions* "should help us to examine our own consciences, to see. . . . that our laws are still a lair of injustice, that we esteem riches alone and do not honor labor." Reading *Les Opinions* in the light of to-day, "our social system would appear what it really is, a system precarious and wretched, a system undermined by the justice of things in the absence of human justice, a system whose ruin has begun."

It is the present which the critic is now striking at—the present under the domino of the past. For the Mississippi affair we must read the scandal of Panama, for Rockstrong the politician, Rochefort. In fact, the whole book is a *livre à clef*. Here begins the socialistic or radical tendency in Anatole France, but coupled with a pessimism so deep as to view any projected reform of society with alarm. As he sees history, no human progress is possible: a change of leaders brings to the front only inexperience and greater tyranny; a revolution merely consecrates liberties already won. So he prefers old governments, because they are weaker and more tolerant; all the advan-

tage he finds in democracy is the fact that its shifting bourgeois ministries can never, like an absolute monarchy, combine and carry out a long-plotted war. And to him war is a relic of man's barbarism, the desire to kill and plunder which he shares with the beasts. "That most frightful plague of civilized nations, military service," he views as a monster masked in false glory and false honor;—a monster grown more cruel with the progress of civilization and the increase of armaments, and destined to perish only from sheer obesity when its time has come.

Equally monstrous to him is the idea of human justice and capital punishment. The very thought of an execution spoils for him the light of day. And he shows that all law is based upon the respect for property—a manifest absurdity when philosophy teaches that man has nothing of his own but life and the power of thought. Yet he has no faith in reform through legislation, no confidence in the return to nature or the natural goodness of man. "When one wishes to make men good . . . one is inevitably led to wish to kill them all."

A sombre pessimism, in fine, colors all the opinions of Jérôme Coignard. Once he believed in science, like Monsieur d'Astarac, whose joyous atheistic fatalism sees in Nature

no conflict, no contradiction, since "nothing exists that does not enter into the march of her larger life." Coignard, however, doubts even experiment, doubts the very possibility of human contribution to the insensible progress of humanity. Finding in science nothing but "spectacles to multiply the illusions of the senses," he now "hates her as a mistress whom he has loved too much." "I used to wish to know everything," he tells his pupil, "and to-day I suffer from my guilty madness.... I should have wrapped myself in saintly ignorance.... An immoderate curiosity dragged me on, my son: in my commerce with books and scholars I have lost the peace of heart, the holy simplicity and the purity of the meek.... But he who has studied in books has ever with him pride and bitterness and despair."

Then, at the very end, comes his illumination. Unconsciously, the good Abbé falls upon the defect of the critical temper in the eyes of an unreasoning world. "Tournebroche, my son," reads the last page of *Les Opinions*, "you see me suddenly become uncertain and embarrassed, tongue-tied and stupid at the thought of correcting what I detest. Don't attribute this to timidity of mind; nothing surprises the boldness of my thought. But take heed of

what I say, my son: truths discovered by the intellect remain sterile; the heart alone is able to give life to its dreams.... It is by feeling that the seeds of good are sown in this world. Reason has no such power; and I must say that, hitherto, I have put too much reliance on reason. So my criticism of laws and customs will fall without fruit and wither like a tree bitten by April frosts. If one is to help mankind, one must reject reason and rise on the wings of enthusiasm."

Anatole France has plainly fallen under the spell of romantic humanitarianism.

One might trace the beginning of this interest in certain pages of *La Vie littéraire*.<sup>8</sup> But it only crystallizes in *Le puits de Sainte-Claire*, published serially this same year in the *Echo de Paris*. For the simple old priest whom we meet in the Prologue is not merely a sort of Abbé Jérôme turned Franciscan, a scholar grown contemptuous of human reason, a Christian socialist moved to mild irony by the comedy of government, justice, and militarism:—he is a dreamer who even hopes for the redemption of the Devil, a tender-hearted dreamer who longs for universal peace and the kingdom of God upon earth. It is this modern Saint Fran-

<sup>8</sup> II, 296; III, 381; etc.

cis who, on the margin of Santa Clara's well at Siena, relates the stories which make up *Le puits de Sainte-Claire*.

These tales are among the best of Anatole France. With a new mirror of refraction, the old fascinating conflict of paganism and Christianity finds another focus. In *San Satiro* is related the temptation of the poor Franciscan Fra, for whom a pagan tomb gives up a phantom rout of satyrs and elusive nymphs, transformed in his nightmare into toothless hags. Tormented by his vision for many days, the good brother comes at last upon the ghost of San Satiro, a satyr who had lived with the first Galileans, helped them and served them; and whose tomb, consecrated after his demise, had become sanctuary for a myriad of pagan wood-folk, forgotten deities grown tiny and light as the chaff that flies before the winnowing-fan.

The story is full of touches from Apuleius. In an earlier volume, Anatole France had once compared the *Golden Ass* to the legends of the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> There, too, he had announced, many years before, the theme of *San Satiro*: "Up to the Middle Ages the monks lived in a never-ending spell." But here the whole fairy-tale becomes a fable of the eternal passing of

<sup>9</sup> *Vie litt.*, I, 121.

the gods, as the phantom satyr-saint tells the poor Franciscan, before he dies suffocated by the sponge the vengeful witches had put in place of his heart.

*San Satiro* thus reminds one of Pater's *Apollo in Picardy*. The fate of forgotten deities plainly fascinated Anatole France, for in *Messer Guido Cavalcanti*, inspired by Boccaccio, another pagan tomb gives up its ghost in a vision, to tell the eager young humanist that in the grave there is no knowledge and to spur him on the way of Learning. But later, "seeing that the purest souls are not without alloy of terrestrial passion, Messer Guido is seduced by the ambitions of the flesh and the powers of this world," so that his experience of life may be full, and he may die knowing that "it is equally cruel and useless to think and to act." This disenchanted disciple of Epicurus was evidently conceived in an earlier, darker mood.

Then comes a story suggested by Vasari. *Lucifer* shows the danger of maligning the Prince of Darkness, for the luckless painter who had caricatured him receives in a dream the Adversary who forsook Heaven in order to become the prince of this world. To this Manichean fantasy succeeds a vaguely socialistic parable, the story of a selfish banker who

dreams he is saved because of a casual act of charity—for the loaves of black bread he had that day tossed impulsively to the poor.

*Le joyeux Buffalmacco* is also inspired by Vasari. But this tale of a practical joker, so reminiscent of certain pages of Boccaccio, has little esthetic justification in the volume, unless it be for the half-suppressed Rabelaisian streak it reveals in its author. Much more interesting is *La dame de Vérone*, a bit of diabolistic fantasy suggested by a Latin sermon, or, farther on in the volume, that story of the Blessed Catherine which puts beside it a sister picture of saintliness, *Le mystère du Sang*. No less graceful are the other brief tales: one taken from the *Miracles of the Virgin*, one from Brantôme's anecdote of love and vengeance, and finally one built upon the visit of Napoleon to San Miniato—a strongly contrasted picture of monastic and military ideals.

But the masterpiece of the series is its longest story, *L'humaine tragédie*. In Jérôme Coignard, two years before, Anatole France had indicated his own return from universal indulgence to a militant skepticism. Then, reliving in art an age of ignorance and faith, he grew regretful of his childish belief, glimpsed again in the figure of Saint Francis. Now he must



justify the intellectual curiosity which has destroyed all that, in order to console himself for its loss. Hence the "human tragedy," the story of Fra Giovanni of Viterbo.

Humblest of Franciscan friars, the playmate of children and the friend of beggars and lepers, fearing to think—"for thought is evil"—Brother Giovanni knows all the joys of lowliness and ignorance; and being happy, is proof against the temptations of the Adversary. "For a man's thoughts are only stirred by sorrow, and his meditations by grief. Then, tortured by fears and desires, he turns anxiously in his bed, and rends his pillow of lies."

So it happens with this simple-hearted child of God. An angel touches his lips with a burning coal, loosens his tongue that he may proclaim the Word of Life. Fra Giovanni goes forth to preach charity and poverty and human brotherhood on earth, talks with a laborer and comes to see society as it is, ruled by oppression and property and trafficking—a world in which the poor man is bound to defend the good things belonging to the rich. He declares the iniquity of the laws and is cast into prison, but he consoles himself for his treatment by the thought that he will die for Truth. Then One appears to him to show him the nature of

that Truth for which he would die, tells him that Truth is white but not pure, and shows him the vision of a vast wheel, like the rose-window of a cathedral, made of numberless moving figures, men of all sorts and conditions, each with a scroll of a different color issuing from his lips. Fra Giovanni reads these scrolls, various in matter as in hue, and finds among them none that does not contradict the others, but every device ends in the words: "Such is the Truth."

And while he sighs at their contrariety, marveling at the heretics and Arabs and Jews and atheists who find place on the wheel, seeking in vain one scroll of white to console him for the blood-red motto of the Pope:—when he calls at last for pure Truth, the Truth for which he is to die, behold! the wheel begins to revolve. Faster and faster it turns, until the devices show only as circles, until the circles themselves disappear, until at last the huge disk looms before him like the moon, white and stainless and dazzling. And he hears a voice, crying: "Gaze now upon that white Truth which you wished to know."

Thus the Devil destroys within him the desire for martyrdom. Then he leads the prisoner away with him to the hills, gives him to eat of

the Apple and reveals to him the beauty and sadness of life. Now Fra Giovanni recognizes his tempter and his teacher, but knowing that he has given him of the fruit of knowledge, taught him to feel and will and suffer, taught him to know life as it is, his heart can only turn toward his teacher in gratitude and love.

No need to point the moral of this epilogue, told with a simplicity and a depth of feeling which prove it a confession. Plainly, Anatole France has a new evangel and a new hero; he has been touched alike by humanitarianism and by the moral beauty of the great Franciscan. Now, of course, his radicalism—his idealistic anarchism—is wholly theoretic. If like Jérôme Coignard, the Fra affirms that law is not corrected by law, he also says that it is not remedied by the destruction of law, since violence begets violence and the reformer becomes like the judge he has slain. We must not strike the wicked, lest we make ourselves like them; we must oppose to force not force but gentleness. And it is interesting to compare the Tolstoyan mildness of this doctrine with his later speeches, when the Dreyfus affair had destroyed his poise and made him an active enemy of Church and army.

Compared with *L'humaine tragédie*, its com-

panion volume of 1894 might well be called a step backward. Soul and senses—never was contrast drawn so sharply as between these tales and the troubling pages of *Le Lys rouge*. It must have been several years on the loom, this novel which takes us back from the age of faith to the society of corrupt sophistication. Instead of a dreamer who feared to doubt, we now have doubters who have all but lost the power to dream; against the purity of the triple vow we have the theme of a double adultery. No devil in *Le Lys rouge*, but in his stead, disillusion, idleness, and the emptiness of life without a task. It is ennui which drives the heroine Thérèse, cultured and sensuous and cynically positivistic, to leave Paris for Italy, leave the commonplace physical bond of her first infidelity for the artist whose love means a new repentance for her restless desires. Thus the background of the story connects it with its predecessor, Siena being changed to Florence, whose adoptive lilies explain the puzzling title. At Santa Maria Novella, at the convent of San Marco, on the hill of Fiesole, the scene is already set for an artist's passion, with all the monuments of a noble past to lend their beauty to the lover's hour of joy.

Indeed this background is decidedly the best

part of the novel, which is episodic, digressive, and lacking in unity and characterization. Exquisite bits of landscape, vistas rich in a double atmosphere of time and space, sketched in a phrase, yet full of delicately complex beauty, gleam and tantalize through the long weary intrigue of love and jealousy; and one carries away the vision of a theater more precious than the comedy. All the charm of mystic Italy, the Italy of Dante and Saint Francis, all the candor of a bygone age, relieves the pervasive skepticism of the ultramodern actors, worthy companions of the cynical, disillusioned Thérèse. Only two are idealists, the sentimental English poetess enamored of Renaissance art, and the vagabond poet Choulette, dreaming Catholic lyrics and preaching Christian socialism in the intervals of a life filled with debauch and repentance. But Miss Bell, with her affected French and her Preraphaelite verses, is certainly a delicate caricature of a well-known English blue-stocking; and in Choulette, the sinner-saint, the mad weak lovable dreamer, every reader will recognize an old associate of the author—the original of *Gestas*, the ineffable Paul Verlaine.

Now and again Choulette reminds one of Gérard de Nerval or Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.

He has something too of Anatole France. His admiration for Saint Francis, his sympathy with the lowly and outcast of society, his contempt of human laws, "which forbid the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, beg or steal," are all traits grown familiar before we hear them on this satyr's lips. But it is he who remarks that "only desire and idleness make us sad," who tells the heroine that sensual love is alloyed with anger, selfishness, and hate.

This perhaps is the moral of the story. For after Thérèse wins her sculptor, after she has learned from him (like Fra Giovanni!) "the delicate joy and sadness of thought," she loses him because of her former sin. And the book becomes a "psychology of jealousy"—the jealousy of a morbid sensitive artist-mind, crystallized in the despairing cry of the final scene: "I see the other one with you all the time."

Thérèse sums up a philosophy in her epigram, "Souls are impenetrable to souls." Before her, Jérôme Coignard had said that. But one must expect to find the same phrases, just as we find the same ideas on art or literature or militarism, in stories born from a subjective mind. Of course the mask is changed; here it is Paul Vence, the critic, disciple of Renan and preacher of irony and pity, who takes the place of the

Abbé. Paul Vence, man of the world, skeptic and author of a socialistic novel, is a modern portrait of Anatole France: the soiled old cassock had only been the picturesquely satiric domino of his first venture into realistic art.

Thus *Le Lys rouge* marks a step toward the final realism of *L'Orme du mail*. First of his real creations—for his 'prentice novels are imitative and Sylvestre Bonnard a wholly subjective figure—came *Balthasar* and *Thaïs*, purely romantic as the *Salammbô* of Flaubert. Grown broader in sympathy, Anatole France created Jérôme Coignard, a product of that inverted romanticism which finds food for its curiosity in the picaresque. Then he portrayed modern society, not as the pure realist or naturalist of *Histoire contemporaine*, but as an idealist who, reviewing the novels of "Gyp" in *La Vie littéraire*, had looked with longing on the delights of this world, at the pageantry of life among those for whom life is in itself an end. Hence the bitterness of his story, revealed alike in both matter and manner—an acrid cynical after-taste of disillusion. And as Gyp's novels had sent him back to his study content, so now he draws from *Le Lys rouge* its own lesson, the lesson which he gives us in the placid pessimism of *Le jardin d'Épicure*.

It were unfair to attempt a summary of this, the masterpiece of Anatole France. For here are gathered his finest *pensées*, the best of all he had published up to 1894, the flower of his skeptical reflection on life and the world. At fifty, Anatole France draws up a philosophic balance-sheet, an Epicurean anthology. It is a living changing album, portraying not merely the dilettante of *La Vie littéraire*, not merely the skeptic who denies all science, all objective truth, but the new Anatole France, alive to the world's injustice, curious of a future in which he would like to believe. For certainly the scholar is now interested in humanity as well as the humanities. Now he admits that we live too much in books, that life is action and that "even the pleasures of the intellect begin only when one sees their relation to life and one's fellow-men." Now he knows that life is worthless if we do not live it, that there is no innocence in renouncing action, that thought itself is an act; and his smiling fatalism is tempered by a gleam of hope. Like Nietzsche, he would hope "not in humanity, but in those inconceivable creatures which will some day spring from man, as man himself has sprung from the brute. Let us put our hope in them, let us hope in that travail of the universe which



finds its physical law in evolution. For this fruitful travail we can feel increasing in our own breasts, keeping us marching toward a goal inevitable and divine."

So the philosopher of the Palace of Art is at last resigned to living. Without illusions as to his importance, for like Jérôme Coignard he does not exempt himself from the irony and pity he would accord to men, Anatole France is now ready to take up his task, to add his imperceptible share to the unknown future. Like *Candide*, he will henceforth "cultivate his garden." And this resignation is no coward's virtue. Through all the bitterness of doubt, in a universe filled with evil, Anatole France calmly rears his pyre of hopes beneath the empty sky, snatching from pessimism itself a torch of courage, a torch which burns with gloomy magnificence through the black nihilism of *Le jardin d'Epicure*.

## CHAPTER VII

**THE IRONIC REALIST: PROFESSOR BERGERET  
AND THE "AFFAIR" (1897-1901).**



## VII

THE year 1896 brought no new volume from the now famous Anatole France. This was a year of golden silence, crowned by an event which must have amused the critic who had rallied the fallibility of the Academy in *Les Opinions* and *Le jardin d'Epicure*. One of the forty had just died, the builder of the Suez Canal, the famous and unfortunate Ferdinand de Lesseps. In the election which followed, the conservatives gave their suffrage to the future radical and socialist, electing him over the anticlerical candidate Ferdinand Fabre. An Immortal now—immortal in spite of his skepticism—Anatole France may henceforth mingle with the affairs of men. For every schoolboy knows that emotion and action are the rights of the immortals.

So Anatole France came down to earth, to the world of to-day. Almost immediately he

published *L'Orme du mail* and *Le Mannequin d'osier*, the first two volumes of a series called *Histoire contemporaine*. This is not a history; it is not even a story; it is a chain of episodes and conversations bearing on vital questions of the day. First written week by week for a newspaper, then gathered into books like the four volumes of essays, these scenes of contemporary manners have every quality except a plot; each chapter stands by itself, a "slice of life" which is also a criticism of life. Begun as journalism, the work became a new form of fiction; and no four volumes bound down to a plot could have painted this living panorama of provincial prejudice and dulness and petty intrigue. Published while the events it satirizes were going on, it is not merely realism: it is *actualism*—life dissected in the making. A bitter impassive irony—the irony of Flaubert—runs through this series of contemporary drawings, etched deeply as by some new aqua fortis, gloomy as Zola but lifted far above him by selective vision, universality, and style. Zola had ignored half of life, sunk the mind in the body: here we have both sides of man's existence, and even sensation becomes material for subtly ironic thought.

This picture of provincial life is largely a

group portrait defined in dialogue. All classes are presented, from the archbishop and the prefect down to the cobbler and the vagabond—a kaleidoscope of prejudice and selfishness dissolving into absurdity at each turn of the author's hand. Only petty interests absorb this community, where intellectual stagnation views with suspicion all those who submit its traditions and its prejudices to reason. But if the events described are trivial, they are pregnant with meaning for the student of French history. Indeed it is not impossible that future research may find in *Histoire contemporaine* the most valuable of the works of Anatole France.

What are the portraits in this unintentional masterpiece? First the clerics: around the corner always lurks a cassock. There is the diplomatic archbishop, a man of the world who entertains state dignitaries with game purchased from a poacher. There is the papal nuncio, a passionless automaton, receiving the rival candidates with the same questions, the same replies. There is the retired army chaplain, who sees the ruin of the military virtues in the decline of faith; there is the young priest infatuated with hunting, and the old priest madly eager to get into print. But it is the

contest for the bishop's ring, running through three volumes in a brilliant series of vignettes, which gives us the best of these clerical portraits: Lantaigne, the superior of the Seminary, and his rival Guitrel. Sturdy, orthodox, and fiery, Lantaigne is the type of the uncompromising cleric: his character is painted in his dismissal of a favorite pupil suspected of weakness of faith. Against him—symbol of the inhumanity of virtue—plots the Abbé Guitrel, tactful and shrewd and dissimulating, trafficking in influence as he traffics in vestments to deck the parlors of the Jewish prefect's wife. For this is the way he lays the foundations of his future bishopric, winning the favor of Cæsar by rendering to him the things that are not his. The curio-hunting Jewess, who sends her daughter to a Catholic convent, is a portrait worthy of Flaubert; so too is the oily, jovial Prefect. Flaubert hated Homais: Anatole France despises Worms-Clavelin, who "listens with his mouth," hates this politician who, contemptuous of creeds as of parties, remains an anti-Semite and a turncoat and an expedientist to the end.

Thus Jew and Christian alike are held up to ridicule. There is, however, a distinctly friendly touch in the portrait of Lantaigne.

Human if not humane, with something of Père Didon's interest in science and modern life,<sup>1</sup> the vigorous Father Superior wins our sympathy by his intellectual honesty and strength. Under the elm-tree on the mall (*L'Orme du mail*), he talks with Professor Bergeret, calmly agnostic but fond of general ideas like himself; they discuss the relativity of truth, the inspiration of Joan of Arc, democracy and militarism; and the reader discovers in the pessimistic Bergeret the third incarnation of Anatole France. Skeptical of the Absolute and the supernatural, doubtful of human progress, Bergeret is not yet a reformer: he finds the Republic tolerant, easy to live under, careless of military glory and too variable to plot a world war. So Bergeret is a passive critic, judging the present in the light of human experience and his own pessimism. At Paillot's book-shop, where he occupies one of the academic chairs in the second-hand book corner, gather Bergeret's other auditors, conservative or radical: and here he draws from the murder committed next door a placid commentary on man's natural ferocity and war's legalized carnage. Here too he meets the old Chief-justice, so confident in the infallibility of legal procedure, whose

<sup>1</sup> *Vie litt.*, IV, 100.



life story stirs the usually unruffled scholar to an expression of horrified doubt. Clearly, the author of this chapter has already taken sides in the Dreyfus affair. Another judge, brave enough to condemn three "anarchists" for the circulation of pamphlets preaching universal brotherhood, typifies that intolerance of free thought and free speech from which Anatole France is soon to suffer with the ironic professor.

For Bergeret does suffer. As a critic of contemporary politics, assailing the triple domination of priest, soldier, and financier, he is hated by Republicans and Clericals alike. Timid and untactful, he suffers in his university, making enemies of his rector and his dean. And with all this he suffers in his home, having married the wife so often chosen by—or choosing—his kind. Practical, uneducated, and proudly ignorant, his Xantippe sees in her lord only a weak incapable dreamer, and as she does not understand him, she has always despised him. Finally, she treats him as Venus did Vulcan—to borrow the euphemism of a French critic, regardless of her matronly unfitness to play the rôle of the Cytherean queen.

The Vulcanization of Monsieur Bergeret is the chief episode of the second volume of the

series, *Le Mannequin d'osier*. The "wicker-work woman" is the dummy upon which Madame Bergeret drapes her dresses, shoved out of the way into the professor's damp and dismal study. Headless and heartless it stands against the well-worn backs of his Latin poets, a wooden lady, a hymeneal symbol. To this study comes the young soldier and former pupil who serves as Mars in the story: and Bergeret here deals his thrusts at militarism and that folly of armaments which must end only in war or bankruptcy. Madame Bergeret enters, and the scene that follows clamors for quotation:

"Monsieur Roux removed Freund's *Dictionary* from an old armchair and gave a seat to Madame Bergeret. Monsieur Bergeret contemplated in turn the quartos pushed against the wall, and Madame Bergeret who had taken their place in the armchair, and reflected that these two groups of matter, differentiated as they then were and so diverse in appearance, nature, and use, had presented an original similarity—a similarity long maintained, when both the dictionary and the lady were still floating in a gaseous state in the primitive nebula.

"'For after all,' he said to himself, 'Madame Bergeret floated about in the infinite of time, shapeless, unconscious, diffused in flickering

gleams of oxygen and carbon. The molecules which were to make up this Latin dictionary, circled at the same time, for ages, in this same nebula, which was to bring forth monsters, insects, and a little thought. It has taken an eternity to produce my dictionary and my wife, monuments of my painful existence, creations defective and at times annoying. My dictionary is full of mistakes. Amelia's coarse body contains an even coarser soul. That is why we can scarcely hope that a new eternity will some day create Knowledge and Beauty. We live for a moment and we should gain nothing by living forever. It is neither time nor space that Nature lacks, and we behold her handiwork!"

"And Monsieur Bergeret still asked his restless soul: 'But what is time, except the very movements of Nature, and can I say that they are long or short? Nature is cruel and commonplace. But whence comes it that I know it? And how can I stand outside of Nature to know her and to judge her? I might have a better opinion of the universe if I held a different place in it.'"

That is Bergeret's portrait, painted by himself. Disillusion and irony have drawn the lips, but the eyes are restless, and the brows intent upon the eternal question. His is no

longer a placid pessimism. He knows that man is a *bête malfaisante*, but he would also learn why he knows it and whence come his pain and indignation. "For if evil alone existed man would not see it, as the night would have no name in the absence of dawn."

To this portrait we must add the reflections of Monsieur Bergeret after he has discovered his betrayal, with its masterly analysis of his incapacity to act his part in the tragicomedy. Through suffering and self-analysis he falls at last upon the origins of modesty—a spiritual experience at once comic and terribly realistic as any page of Bourget or Stendhal. Nowhere is the man of books so pitilessly presented to a world of action; yet Bergeret wins his ends by the very passivity of his revenge. He ignores his impenitent wife, meets her unseeing as a ghost, makes her doubt her own existence in his absolute disregard. And at last she leaves the husband whose timidity has evolved a vengeance so ludicrous and so effective.

"Vivre c'est détruire. Agir c'est nuire." So Bergeret finds that his abstention from action is itself a force that hurts, and realizes, with comic pride, that he too is a destructive animal in a world of carnage. Soon he will know that even thoughts are acts, may become acts: all

the antimilitarism of the book prepares us for his stand in the Dreyfus case. How deft his thrusts at the simplicity of the soldier, the bait of the uniform, the illusion of glory so carefully kept up by the State. "The least we can do is to flatter those whom we send out to be shot." How bitter his denunciation of the military code, the court martial, "fit only for a chamber of horrors in a museum." A pacifist, he can hope only that war may be staved off by the mediocrity of cabinets or the greed of High Finance. "A socialistic Europe will probably be friendly to peace. For there will be a socialistic Europe, Monsieur l'Abbé," says he to Lantaigne, "if indeed we may call socialism that unknown power which is approaching."

Evidently Bergeret has changed—like Anatole France! In his universal curiosity the scholar has left his study, now and again, for the streets, and in the streets he has seen the life of the unfortunate and the oppressed. And he has not seen the injustice of it unmoved. Hence the social pity in the brilliant sketch of the wayfarer Pied d'Alouette, the pity and irony combined in the portrait of the cobbler Piedagnel. Only a living experience could have written these chapters; a heart once thrilled by the story of Saint Francis here touches life it-

self, to draw from its bleeding core a lesson of universal love.

The professor's spectator-phase is ending. Bergeret does not adopt a party, range himself with the anticlericals of his sympathies, for he knows that parties and party disputes are useless, that nothing matters to the State so much as the conditions under which its citizens live.<sup>2</sup> But events in France are forcing him to enter a party. The *Affaire Dreyfus* had just shown the enormous power of the army; it had revealed the injustice of the army's code. Accused of selling military secrets to Germany, a young captain of artillery had been condemned behind closed doors by a court martial; and now, after a public degradation, was paying in exile for the honor of the army and the misfortune of his Jewish birth. As usual, the country was "betrayed," and at first no one questioned the justice of the verdict. But Dreyfus's friends were active and did not rest until they had interested the public in this violation of human rights. Hence the constant satire of the military code in *Histoire contemporaine*. Published in an anti-Dreyfusard journal (*L'Echo de Paris*), these pages still moulded opinion: intelligent readers knew how to take

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 316.

their ironic detachment, and even the literal might here read both sides of the question involved.

Meanwhile, the heroic Colonel Picquart had tried to reopen the case, only to be sent to Tunis for his pains. Scheurer-Kestner, vice-president of the Senate, had also failed. Esterhazy, suspected by Picquart, was triumphantly white-washed; Picquart was arrested, and Emile Zola published on the thirteenth of January, 1898, his charge against the judges of Dreyfus and Esterhazy. Even this daringly brilliant letter, whereof every paragraph begins "*J'accuse*," failed of immediate effect: Zola was condemned: the Minister of War brought forth new "proofs," got the Chamber of Deputies to ratify the judgment of the court martial; and when Picquart declared that these so-called proofs were irrelevant and false, he found himself arrested again.

Then came the confession of the original forgery by Colonel Henry, successor to Picquart on the General Staff. Esterhazy now confessed: he had forged the first "evidence" used against the victim. Thereupon the Court of Cassation annulled the decision of the court martial and ordered a second military trial, which began at Rennes in August, 1899. The

honor of the army was saved; Dreyfus was declared "guilty with extenuating circumstances"—a verdict which would be laughable if it were not tragic. Nor did the pardon of President Loubet help matters: Dreyfus and his party claimed exoneration. But laws were passed to prevent reopening the case, and it was not until six years later that the Court of Cassation revised the verdict and Dreyfus was reinstated in the army.

Many will remember the echoes of this drama, which resounded over the civilized world. In France, in Paris, it was a veritable explosion. Party feeling flamed high; not since the days of the Commune had the city seen such a conflagration. Dreyfusards everywhere were denounced as traitors to their country. The last two volumes of *Histoire contemporaine* show how this storm of hatred spread through the provinces, even to the stagnant little city of this satiric comedy, even to the peace-loving heart of Professor Bergeret. And in the sufferings of this partisan of justice, in his ferocious pessimism and sarcastic irony, we may read the sufferings of Anatole France, who from the beginning stood with Zola and his little band of *intellectuels*, to denounce the



methods of the court martial and defend Dreyfus.

*L'Anneau d'améthyste* first presents us to the anti-Dreyfusards. From the very beginning they declare themselves: Guitrel, the abbé; the Royalist and anti-Semite Duc de Brécé; Lerond, the ex-judge, now pleading for the congregations; and the old general whom we have already met in active service at his desk, commanding an army of soldiers in his neat boxes of name-cards. Not one but condemns Dreyfus, and with him all the traitors who call for revision; not one but thinks these "Freemasons, anticlericals, and Jews" the real enemies of France. This is the litany we hear in the chapel of the Catholic Duke, in his chateau where black-robed ladies knit beneath the portraits of their ancestors and the princes of the Bourbon line: and even the fair Jewish widow of the neighboring estate, so eager to enter this aristocratic circle, shares the anti-Dreyfusard violence of her wild soldier lover. Under her roof reappears Guitrel, still pulling wires for his bishopric; and there we meet her crafty, egoistic, degenerate son. Now a new thread is brought into the weft, for this little Jew wants *le bouton des Brécé*,—the coveted button which will admit him to the hunting parties of the

Duke; and to obtain it he must promise to support the Abbé. Then the story returns to Monsieur Bergeret, and we leave realism for a while to listen to a philosopher.

Freed at last from his wife, Bergeret would resign himself to life as it is. But his reverie on Hercules is a parable on that Force Incarnate to which Europe bows; all his utterances in the academic book-shop condemn secret trials and class justice and judicial infallibility. And since his attitude provokes general reprobation, since he is left alone in his martyrdom, his good housekeeper bethinks herself of bringing to her master a stray dog, in the hope that he may lighten the scholar's loneliness. Not to spoil by quotation this delightful chapter, the half-discouraged professor, "qui n'était pas triste," makes acquaintance with Riquet, through an accident which reveals the affection of his canine friend. Henceforth, the pages where Riquet appears are the best in the book, for he alone can evoke a forgotten indulgence in a master embittered by his intellectual participation in the "affair."

For Monsieur Bergeret, progressively idealized from the beginning of the series, we may be permitted to substitute Anatole France. He, too, had already supported Dreyfus indirectly;

his free discussion of the army and of military justice had revealed his real sympathies. Then, provoked beyond measure by later developments, he found irony insufficient, and signed with the first the petition for revision which appeared on the morrow of Zola's letter *J'accuse*. This was the *Protestation des Intellectuels*, and it brought to its signers all the hate and obloquy of the mob. Visitors to Paris in 1898 will remember the mass-meetings, the violence of the military press, the mad battle waged against this new Leonidas and his little group of heroes.

Hence the note of pessimism sounded so early in *L'Anneau d'améthyste*. Discouraged by his first encounter with real life, the man of books decides for the moment that action, too, is vain. "Work amuses our vanity," he tells us, "work deceives our impotence and gives us the hope of some good result. We flatter ourselves that it helps us control destiny. Not understanding the necessary relations which bind our efforts to the mechanics of the universe, it seems to us that this effort is directed in our favor against the rest of the machine. Work gives us the illusion of will, of strength and independence. It makes us divine in our own eyes."

This reversion to determinism is of course to

be expected. Anatole France had dreamed of humanity as an apostle might dream—a Saint Francis or a Tolstoy. Now, struggling unsuccessfully with the blind prejudice of the herd, he views humanity as pessimistically as Monsieur Bergeret in his library beset by the mob. “Pecus is fed fat with ancient lies. He clings to error—error that he has tested. He is imitative and would appear more so, if he did not deform what he imitates. These deformations produce what we call progress.”

Thus Professor Bergeret, while stones are crashing through his library window. Unquestionably, he has his own reasons to be pessimistic. But soon comes an event which modifies his fatalism, renews his power of self-illusion. Promoted at last to a professorship, he finds “a joy greater than might have seemed consonant with his progress in ataraxy,” a joy which transforms his pessimism. The cynic who had called life a leprosy, a disease, who had rejoiced to think it a pure terrestrial accident, now tells his favorite pupil of his belief in the inhabitants of the stars. “He peoples the empty sky, because he has been made a professor. Monsieur Bergeret is a philosopher, but he is also a man.” One might add: Why try to be wiser than Monsieur Bergeret?

So through plain lives and high thinking, *L'Anneau d'améthyste* progresses to its end. Guitrel gets his bishopric, supported as he is by women and influential Jews, and this mediator between Church and State promptly turns against the latter in support of the over-taxed congregations. The wealthy anti-Semite Jewess loses her soldier lover, implicated in the forgeries of the "affair." Professor Bergeret is called to Paris, to give a course in the Sorbonne, and prepares to quit the town which his departure transmutes for him into a mere empty image. And we close the third volume of *Histoire contemporaine* struck by the sociologic character of its dialogue—evidence that its author is now seeking a living pragmatic truth.

*L'Anneau d'améthyste* is the real climax in this essay in realism. Lacking in plot, the narrative scarcely allows a new Parisian background. So despite the professor, *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris* (1901) seems rather like a sixth act in a play. The plotting of the Royalists, the Nationalist movement, are, to be sure, sequels of the "affair," and the author finds means to draw most of his provincial types to Paris, but the reader wearies of politics, of its turncoat social climbers, of women who sell themselves for political ends, of the whole cyn-

ical farce of opportunism hidden in filthy backstairs behind the posters of the tricolor. Possibly this is why Anatole France wearied of it too. Why should he continue? He had shown how a novel might be written without a plot and realize every perfection except climax. He had shown that satire need not destroy art, the art of *Le jardin d'Epicure*; for even its finest pages attain no higher level than the episode of Riquet or Pied d'Alouette.

Fine pages of course are not lacking in *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*, especially in the early chapters written in the tenderly reminiscent manner of *Le Livre de mon ami*. Transferred to the capital, the scholar finds at last a suitable apartment, though he hates apartments for the inartistic uniformity of their multicellular life. Once more he gathers about him his wandering Penates; and in his new study, talking with the carpenter busy at some new book-shelves, he first reaps a word of praise for his martyrdom from this proletarian Dreyfusard.

Of course poor Riquet must bark at the departing workman. For Riquet bows to clothes as men to uniforms, and like men he detests the new. So to his master's tender irony, the dog becomes a symbol of Pecus, of the brute

herd which had taken the side of force and injustice and falsehood. Riquet, too, follows the prejudices of his race. Riquet, too, is turned away from pity and justice by fear, by the fear which was father to the gods and to every crime. Riquet, too, will raise his voice against the new divinity Justice, admiring force because he finds it sovereign. And Monsieur Bergeret concludes: "You do not know that force devours itself. You do not know that every weapon must fall before a just idea. You do not know that our real force is in wisdom, that only through it are nations great. You do not know that what makes national glory is not the senseless clamor of the mob, but the august thought hidden in some attic, which will some day overrun the world and change its very face. You do not know that they honor their fatherland who for justice have suffered prison, exile, and insult. You do not know."

Action has made Anatole France believe in justice—he who first believed only in irony and pity. Now he will even question pity, for if he still gives to the beggar, he knows that "alms debase equally the receiver and the giver." Alms only keep up the reign of injustice; real charity is the participation of all in productive labor and its fruits. "We have nothing to give

of our own," he tells us, "nothing but ourselves. So we only truly give when we give our work, our souls, our genius, and this magnificent offering of one's whole self enriches the giver as much as the community."

Even the self-centered—if true Epicureans—must find out the joys of altruism. None the less, this altruism does not make Bergeret an optimist. He knows that "to live without illusions is the secret of happiness." But having acted, this skeptic must believe in action, must be at least a meliorist. So if he has no faith in the natural goodness of man, he draws some consolation out of man's emergence from original savagery—a promise from the past for an equally distant future. He looks for no millennium; he knows that evil must always exist as the necessary complement of good, for like suffering and pity, it is a part of the nature of things. But man may at least rid society of artificial evil, find for human slavery a substitute in machinery, in the unknown energy of the electric spark. Then, the masters of the machine will be content with the honor of directing it, and wages and profits will all be done away.

Of course, this is simply the theory of communism. But, "are not the best things of life



common to all?" To air and light, our primitive dowry from Nature, have we not already added the roads, the rivers, the royal parks, the libraries, and the art galleries? Certainly, communism will improve at least some of the conditions of life; so, believing that "men are less malevolent when they are less miserable," the generous scholar will give his hand and his faith to the task of improvement. "We must work at the future like the weavers of high-warp tapestry, without seeing what we are weaving." And if this dream of his, this longed-for City of Light, prove only a mirage, he feels that the vision will not be wholly lost. It is good for men to build their Utopias. For "the dreams of philosophers alone excite men to action," and "it is thought which really creates the future." Surely, a living word will some day sweep all social iniquity away, and if he may not see it go, he knows that it must disappear as surely as did the giant saurians of our geologic past.

So we are not surprised to find Anatole France ready to carry his new truth to the people. Drawn at last into the streets, the man of letters will soon mount the tribune of reform. He will speak to socialists and radicals and students, add his word wherever men dream

generous dreams for France. No vain optimist, but chastened by life, he will do his share in the secular task of progress, sure that "slowly, but inevitably, humanity will bring to realization its sages' dreams."



## CHAPTER VIII

**THE SOCIALIST AND THE REFORMER: CRAINQUE-  
BILLE (1902-05)**



## VIII

THE *Histoire contemporaine* had not occupied Anatole France exclusively during the troublous years from 1896 to 1901. "One must sometimes seek distraction from the affairs of to-day," Monsieur Bergeret had said, ironically explaining the fables in sixteenth-century French which adorn the last two volumes of the series. But insomuch as these chapters still satirize the present in their allusions, it is clear that the novelist found distraction only in his other books of this period, *Pierre Nozière* and *Clio*.

Both volumes preceded *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*. Both may be classified as digressions; and if *Clio*, a collection of historical tales, naturally falls in our next chapter, the reminiscent *Pierre Nozière* demands an excursus in this one. From now on we must be prepared for books like this, second harvests of memories. And no reader of *Pierre Nozière* will

be sorry to find the book a companion volume to *Le Livre de mon ami*, or regret that the old Anatole France has not entirely passed away in the new.

A truce to satire! The tired publicist now returns to his youth, to the old Bible and its quaint woodcuts, to the mother who told such charming stories to her little boy. He tells us of his nurse and her scapegrace husband, of the old curio merchant, of the bookseller of the quays. He will draw the portrait of his first editor, sketch again the two artist comrades of *Le Chat maigre*. Then, in mid-career, his vein suddenly runs out: narration gives way to fragmentary impressions or memories, "Notes written by Pierre Nozière on the margins of his big Plutarch." Now he inserts a *pensée* which recalls *Le jardin d'Epicure*, now a dialogue probably written in the days when he used to imitate Renan. The dialogue proves to be a skeptic's criticism of intelligence, but the reader will agree, with one of the speakers, that the whole diatribe is only a lovers' quarrel, attacking a beloved mistress because "she does not yet rule the world."

The last half of the volume is filled with travel-impressions evidently drawn from some old diary: *Promenades de Pierre Nozière en*



*France.* In his summer vacations he has visited Pierrefonds, Vernon, Eu, and other corners of Picardy and Brittany; and the result is a delightful journal, mingled with saintly legend and bits of medieval story. "For cities are like books, beautiful picture-books in which our forefathers are seen." Standing before their time-worn pages of stone, the earlier Anatole France is born again—the poet who regrets the sacred groves and springs, the pagan gods and cults surviving only as local superstitions. "As long as there are woods, meadows, and mountains, lakes and rivers, as long as the white vapors of the morning still rise from the streams, there will be nymphs and dryads, there will be fairies. They are the beauty of this world: that is why they will never pass away."<sup>1</sup>

Delightful too are the chapters on the country fairs, on the fisher-folk of Brittany. Here, by the sombre ocean of the Baie des Trépassés, he is moved to write a long reverie on the Odyssey, perfect as the finest pages of *La Vie littéraire*, and prophetic of *Clio* in its tenderly vivid realism.<sup>2</sup> Thus even on the farthest rocks of Finisterre, he finds the beauty that he brings to them. Surely it is an artist and a real patriot who describes so lovingly each town or city of

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 219.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.



his wanderings, reading its history in the old stones which he would leave unrestored to the touch of time. For each little city speaks to him, tells him of those who have called it mother, of those who are gone. "They pass, but I remain to keep their memory green. I am their commemoration. That is why they owe me everything, for man is only man because he remembers. . . I have received wounds which men thought mortal. But I live because I have hoped. Learn from me that sacred hope which saves the fatherland. Think in me so as to think beyond yourselves. Work for your children as your ancestors have worked for you. Your sons will know what jewels you in your turn have set in my robe of stone."<sup>3</sup>—So at last we find a page to link with the present this sheaf gathered from the portfolios of the past. Born of a vacation mood, it is an interlude in an optimistic key. For all this time his main interest is in social satire: he is still concerned with politics and Monsieur Bergeret, and when at last he drops *Histoire contemporaine*, it is only to write the story of *Crainquebille*.

*Crainquebille* is an attack on the iniquities of the law. After the military code comes the turn of civil procedure, whose real injustice

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

had long been evident to Anatole France. Needless to recall the Abbé Coignard's strictures against the laws, or the satire in the story of Fra Giovanni and the opinions of Professor Bergeret. But it is always interesting to seek the genesis of a book, and *Crainquebille*, undoubtedly, is an expansion of the incident of the simple Pied d'Alouette.

Arrested on suspicion, the vagabond of *Le Mannequin d'osier* leaves his prison unscathed. In *Crainquebille* the law consummates the ruin of its victim. Condemned for a pretended insult to a gendarme, the poor huckster pays the penalty of his ignorance, since his unreadiness of tongue only weakens his defense. In spite of his lawyer, in spite of the witness who exonerates him, he goes to jail: and when freed at last after serving his time, he finds himself without customers, the byword and the laughing-stock of the quarter. Poor human cart-horse, denied his bread after forty years of brutalizing toil, what wonder that he turns to drink! But the irony of Fate has not yet done with Crainquebille. Sunken, at last, so low that he regrets his prison and his prison fare, he really cries "Down with the cops," this time to a grave patient gendarme who rebukes, but refuses to arrest him. And the derelict of the

law is forced to resume his hopeless, homeless way.

The cold, biting irony of this story recalls Maupassant. Reprinted in *Opinions sociales*, it was given a larger audience in a pamphlet published at half a franc, and finally it was turned into a play. The cheap edition came out in the *Bibliothèque socialiste* (1902), preceded by the even more brutally satiric *Conte pour commencer l'année*. In this, the typical sugary New Year's tale is turned into a bitter farce—the chimney-sweep marrying the daughter of the rich man by necessity—a satire of social pity from an author convinced that the poor need not pity, but justice. The same idea recurs in another chapter of the pamphlet, *Clopinel*—the story of Monsieur Bergeret and the beggar, drawn from *Histoire contemporaine*. Then comes Bergeret's conversation with the carpenter, *Roupart*. *Opinions sociales*, which runs through two volumes in this series, reprints in fact all of the master's views on questions social or economic, all that the Abbé Coignard or the professor had said in criticism of things as they are. It is really a tract, a tract against the clerical party and the anti-Semites, against the army, the press, and the injustice of the law.

Nor is this all. These pamphlets contain some of the addresses of Anatole France, who had begun to speak in public during the "affair." He defends Picquart, the heroic colonel who first stood for justice; he lifts his voice for popular education, for the university-extension movement among the masses. He works for progress, for enlightenment, for the greater glory of a future France. And like Sainte-Beuve he has the art to make these "allocutions," written in the study as they were, simple and forceful and direct as any measured speech.

At the same time he is polishing for another audience a book of another sort, a novel, *Histoire comique*. He is still ambitious to write a story à la Bourget, and ten years after *Le Lys rouge*, he will justify again the sage's quiet existence by a picture of love and jealousy and the life of pleasure-seeking Paris. In *Histoire comique* an actor commits suicide in the presence of his former mistress, hoping that his dying prohibition may keep her from the arms of his successor. How he succeeds in this, how his memory is transformed in a mind too nervously imaginative and not quite normal, until it becomes an accusing ghost which forbids her love, is the story of this novel, a hard, cold, Degas-like picture, which to the realism of

Maupassant adds the morbid psychology of Bourget or Zola.

Anatole France thinks the story "comic," that is to say, "concerned with comedians." He might have explained the adjective by Scarron's title, *Roman comique*. But there is nothing comic in this glimpse of the greenroom and its sordid life, disclosed as by the pitiless glare of the footlights—a world of compromise and carnal love and grosser egoism cloaked by the name of art. When the story-teller speaks in his own person of "that social hypocrisy which makes it possible for people to look at each other without horror and disgust," one wonders if Anatole France has taken a step backward. Such bitterness, such pessimism either mark a moment of reaction, or prove the novel, like *Le Lys rouge*, a work of several years.

Such an observation shows us the author off his guard. For the rest, his irony finds vent through the lips of his characters, bitter and nihilistic in the dramatic author Constantin Marc, indulgently Epicurean in Doctor Trublet. This genial old skeptic, attached officially to the theater and unofficially to the pretty *comédiennes*—this Doctor Socrates, who laments "the deplorable misunderstanding which, eighteen centuries ago, put humanity on bad terms

with nature," is another Anatole France, smiling through that Æsculapian mask which he had worn in *Jocaste*.

Perhaps the mask is adopted to justify the pessimism. At any rate Doctor Trublet's opinions are old and familiar. Like the hero of the earlier novel, he too believes that "life is murder." For him, "stupidity is the necessary condition of happiness": morality "the consent of all to keep what they have." So might one string a chaplet of despair from the maxims of this scientific fatalist, who, certain of human irresponsibility, certain that free will is an illusion, sees the only hope of moral improvement in a change of material conditions for men. Thus, he thinks, even that primal law of murder may pass, fall before the progress of chemistry or the useful arts. In so much at least he resembles the new Anatole France. But, if this result is not possible, if the world is, as it seems, irremediably bad, the old *viveur* consoles himself by the thought that he has at least enjoyed the spectacle it has given him.

Trublet takes us back, not merely to *Jocaste*, but to its author, the naturalist and disciple of Taine. Is he the real Anatole? "On revient toujours à ses premières amours." Anatole France returns, not as an idealist of science,

but as a skeptic content to accept truths merely pragmatic. "I am a physician," Trublet tells us in self-justification, "I keep a drug-shop of lies. I give relief, consolation. Can one console and relieve without lying?" And he adds, "Women and doctors know how necessary and how helpful lies are to men."

Trublet has lost faith in absolute truth. "Men are not created to know, men are not created to understand." If we know more than the dog, it is but a trifle, and "our illusions increase with our knowledge." We can know nothing, attain no certainty, do nothing; and like Bergeret, Trublet draws a bleak comfort from the thought that the future already exists like a book unread, a reality which we only uncover as we turn the leaves. "It is possible to think that we all died long ago," observes this modern Marcus Aurelius. "Think so, and you will be at peace."

Such pessimism undoubtedly reflects the author's disappointment in the "affair." The failure of action results in the denial of action. But it recalls also his youthful view of the world about him, reflects its gloom and magnifies it. "To know society as it really is," says a journalist of the story, "would make us all fall swooning with disgust and horror."<sup>4</sup> Certainly, *His-*

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 211.

*toire comique* was conceived in the middle nineties, together with *L'Orme du mail*. In 1903, Anatole France is speaking at meetings, working for reform, not merely because he finds in work a nepenthe for ennui, but because his opened eyes perceive so much to do.

There was, for instance, the question of Church and State. The Dreyfus affair aroused great feeling against the cassock, when Frenchmen saw that the clerics had used anti-Semitism to forward their own reactionary ends. Equally prominent among monarchical revolutionists and in the Nationalist movement, they had shown themselves a dangerous force in the Republic. Hence the campaign against the teaching congregations, the closing of the church schools and, ultimately, the separation of Church and State. So, not content with his satire of episcopal appointments in the four novels, Anatole France now wrote a tract for disestablishment, *L'Eglise et la République*.

The campaign begun by the caricature-portrait of the Abbé Jérôme is now complete. With quiet, well-bred irony, he shows the unchanging claims of Rome to powers both spiritual and temporal, retraces the history of the Church in the Third Republic, lays bare the intrigues and the secret motives of ecclesiastical policy,



builds up his case against the Concordat. And the conclusion of the pamphlet is a ringing appeal to Frenchmen to stop this control of France from without, to destroy this political force by abolishing the division of power agreed upon by a despot a century before.

Nor was his rôle as a propagandist to end here. In *Vers les temps meilleurs*, made up of all his speeches delivered from 1898 to 1906, the publisher of *L'Eglise et la République* carried out definitely the task of bringing together all his propaganda—a task only begun by the fragmentary pamphlets of the *Bibliothèque socialiste*. Half a hundred speeches, addresses, and letters were collected, a panoply of good counsel for the proletariat in its struggle for better conditions. Not to listen to the preachers of suffering, for “it is joy which is good,” but to trust in reason and science which free men from the vain terrors of theology; not to support the Nationalists or the contractors who urge increased armies and armament, nor the politicians who seek to involve France in imperialism, but to work for the peace universal which the proletariat of all nations is preparing—such is the perpetual refrain of these pages: optimistic pages, in fine, for if society is now only “organized barbarism and regular-

ized injustice, still it is thought which, despite the victories of force, conducts the world." Two fine tributes, one to the heroic spirit of Emile Zola—"il fut un moment de la conscience humaine"—another to Ernest Renan, are included; in the latter, the magnificent discourse of Pallas Athene has often been compared to *La prière sur l'Acropole*. But always he is preaching the cause of humanity and human solidarity, branding the Armenian massacres, scoring the murderous treatment of the revolutionists in St. Petersburg. And just after the Czar's visit, while Parisian crowds are still shouting "Vive la Russie," he has the courage to unmask and denounce the capitalistic interests which have contrived this political comedy in order to pay for the Japanese war out of the French stocking. Loan and alliance are another victory of capitalism over the masses, a victory cloaked by a secret diplomacy which no republic should allow. In his vision, France should be the leader in a sane preparation for a pacifistic Europe; for "universal peace will be realized, not because man will become better, but because a new order of things, a new science, new economic necessities will impose peace."

All this in spite of Germany, with her "per-

fect corporal, the corporal Hohenzollern, the corporal Lohengrin, who, corporal in soul as in mustachios, was destined by profession and by nature to make war." For if, in 1905, this superman had proved himself eminent in everything except that, who were responsible? The German Socialists, concludes Anatole France;—falling into the naïve error that national wars can be averted by the "Internationale."

Naïve, but generous surely. A writer of fiction may be proud of such a dream. And notwithstanding all this polemic activity, Anatole France was still a writer of fiction. The story of Crainquebille was rounded out to a volume with other sketches, realistic and contemporary and for the most part satiric of militarism and justice founded on property—still reflecting the author's reaction to the "affair." Two stories of the occult and a mystic legend are exceptions, as well as the inimitable account of the imaginary *Putois*, a fable on the growth of a belief. The volume seems to be made up of odds and ends; it contains several detached chapters evidently left over from *Monsieur Bergeret à Paris*; and next to *Putois*, its best pages are the delightful *Pensées de Riquet*, a parody of La Bruyère, satirizing from a canine

point of view our anthropomorphic philosophy and religion.

Much of this work probably dates from a few years before. The book which best reflects his present interest, and which crowns the polemic period now drawing to a close, is *Sur la pierre blanche* (1905). A pure dialogue, or rather a symposium, it contains two works of fiction, a story of the past and a dream of the future. Several Frenchmen meet in the Roman Forum, and a conversation on Roman archeology, religion, and prehistory introduces us to the first narrative, another resurrection of the life of a Roman province under the emperors. Read to the company by its author, the story of *Gallio*, proconsul of Achaia under Claudius, is a bit of tapestry embroidered on the incidents described in Acts xviii. 12-17.

As seen by Anatole France, Gallio is a model of Roman virtue, just and temperate as Pontius Pilatus in the earlier tale. Besides this, he is a man of culture, stirred by a noble curiosity in all the things of the intellect. With a group of friends he is discussing the future, the certain future of Rome assured by the *pax Romana*, the doubtful future of the old religion already become a symbol in a larger recognition of natural law. Gallio, who would reconcile

the Stoic doctrine with the old beliefs, rises to the conception of a single God, obedient only to his own nature, the God of the Stoics. Yet in his wisdom he would show his companions the value of diversity of religion, since such diversity alone guarantees tolerance and personal freedom. And they speak of the immortality of the soul, the immortality of the gods, and wonder what god will succeed Jupiter when he follows Saturn into oblivion. At this point the Proconsul is interrupted by a band of quarreling Jews, claiming an audience. Despite the protests of his friends, Gallio yields to duty, knowing that this turbulent race, full of new Dionysiac sects whose propaganda admitted no tolerance, must be watched as a menace to peace in Corinth no less than at Rome. And all deplore the infiltration of this Asiatic poison through the Empire.

Meanwhile Gallio listens to the plaintiff, who, chief of the synagogue, accuses a certain Paul of inducing men to worship God in a manner contrary to Jewish law. But Saint Paul's defense he will not hear, declaring: "If it were a matter of wrong or of wicked lewdness, I would bear with you, but if it be a question of words and names of your law, I shall be no judge of such matters." And he rejoins

his friends, all unconscious of having dismissed the co-founder of a world-religion destined to supplant the Stoic philosophy and the pagan gods.

Gallio sought the future. The future comes to him and he knows it not. Indifferent to the deformed little Jew whom he takes for a fanatical follower of Orpheus or Adonis, the Proconsul turns the conversation back into its former channel, and leaving the Apostle to be stoned by the Jews, he sets forth his view that Hercules is destined to dethrone Jove and rule the world.

*Gallio* is thus suspiciously like an attempt to repeat the success of *Le Procureur*. The story finished, sources are cited and discussed. Tacitus and Seneca have added coloring to the silhouette of the Bible-story, developed from a hint found in a passage of Renan. For the historian of Christianity had also remarked the irony of the situation, although his inference from it was far less flattering to Gallio.

*Sur la pierre blanche* now reverts to a discussion on the growth of religions, and the evolution of morals which prepared the way alike for Stoicism and for Christianity. The cyclic theory of cosmic life, the more immediate future as seen in man's various Utopias, are

touched upon; then the talk returns to the possibility of prediction. Surely the history of man should yield certain analogies, certain parallels or probabilities. The progress of labor from slavery and serfdom to an equality with capital may indicate the future triumph of the proletariat, as the decline of paganism suggests a like fate for Christianity. The virtual *pax Romana* of a world unified by conquest and commerce may presage a new world-truce, after colonization has brutally imposed a new solidarity. Peace may come, concludes Anatole France; for, if Germany and America still appear belligerent, his fatherland has certainly lost under the Republic her old love of things military.

At the little table of the Roman restaurant where the company dines, another manuscript is read—a dream of the future conceived after the manner of William Morris and H. G. Wells. A young Parisian, bored and disillusioned and skeptical, awakes one morning in the year 220 of the Federation of the Peoples—2270 according to our chronology. He finds himself in a country transformed, a sort of endless suburb filled with tiny houses and their gardens. Overhead huge birds and fishes are gliding through the air, or pausing to fill the empty streets with

workers of both sexes, indistinguishable in garb. Entering a restaurant, he learns that one must work to eat, and one of the Utopians imagining him an estray from the Republic of Africa, leads him to a bakery where he receives his ticket, wages of six hours' toil. This friend takes him home in his aeroplane, and after supper, the stranger learns how the new order of things had come about. War had ceased with the twentieth century, secret diplomacy giving way to an international committee of citizens opposed to colonial greed, which had caused the last conflicts among nations. Meanwhile, a capitalistic régime had naturally evolved into collectivism; armies were supplanted by a socialistic militia and the undefended monarchies had become republics and made alliance. Then, after fifty years of experiment and economic misery, fourteen workmen had organized and distributed the conflicting powers and resources of this new society, a beehive without drones, where every worker profited alike by intensive agriculture and an intensive development of machinery and applied chemistry. With ample time to pursue the arts (for here, as with Oscar Wilde, the individualism of Anatole France reveals its desire), contented to labor and be fed, the inhabitants of this new Utopia still



confess they are not happy. But *que voulez-vous?* No one at least is miserable, and by abolishing property and cities they have been able to do away with crime and litigation.

The dream concludes with an episode showing the relation of the sexes, freed from the personal servitude of marriage and apparently from the Petrarchistic illusions of courtship! And the reader, laying down his manuscript, receives the placid comment of a classical quotation: "You seem to have slept upon the white stone, in the midst of the people of dreams." Dreams! So, possibly, the whole Utopia is not to be taken very seriously in the author. For if like Renan he accepts the possibility of Caliban, if we may attribute to him the statement of one listener, "I do not wish for socialism, but I do not fear it,"—he does put his dream of the new Atlantis under the decidedly ambiguous rubric, "Through the Gate of Ivory, or through the Gate of Horn!"

## CHAPTER IX

**THE HISTORIAN AND THE SATIRIST OF HUMAN-  
ITY: THE PENGUINS (1906-1914).**



## IX

**A**NATOLE FRANCE was now sixty-two. In *Vers les temps meilleurs* (1906) he had rounded out no less than thirty volumes. For the last ten years he had lived with his times, and in the arena as in his study had still averaged a book a year. But from that first descent into the world of the present, from the appearance of *L'Orme du mail* (1897), he had produced no sustained masterpiece like *La Rôtisserie*; only one volume of this polemic decade revealed the patient student and lover of the past.

This volume was *Clio* (1900). The muse of history offers five pictures from the story of man's existence, five typical panels, no longer mystic or philosophical like the earlier tales, but products of the same reaction and of the same vision which sharpened the realism of *Histoire contemporaine*. "We want to show Hector in greaves," said the author in *Pierre*

*Nozière*, "and give to all the figures of legend and history their real characteristics." Thus a minute archeological exactness, such as Flaubert had attempted in *Salammbô*, is the keynote of *Clio*, dedicated, by the way, to the champion of naturalism and Dreyfus, Emile Zola.

Not Hector, but the singer of Hector, opens the panorama. A world poetic in its very realism, baldly poetic as the humbler scenes of the *Odyssey*, is revived for us in *Le chanteur de Kymé*; the poor old minstrel, rude yet profoundly human, has something of the heroic candor of Rodin's *Penseur*. Living meagerly with his faithful slave, patient and laborious, the ancient bard teaches the children of Kyme the Fair the songs he had received from his father, and his father from the muses themselves. These sacred songs must not be changed, he tells them, hiding the fact that he has added whole cantos to the muses' inheritance, sung so often at the tables of the shepherd-kings. Everything in the picture is presented objectively: his ignorance—for he knows by his dreams that the dead still live in some dim shadowy world; his resignation, which accepts without bitterness the hard contrast between the lot of the bard and the warrior; his love of beauty, his idealism and disgust at life's brutal-

ities. When the banquet of one of these rough chieftains ends in a battle, and the aged poet is hurt by a flying torch, he picks up his lyre, curses the house and its occupants, and walks calmly seaward on the moonlit cliff, until the earth which had borne him so long fails beneath his faltering steps.—For this objectivity, Homer himself furnished outlines and colors—even figures, like that little sister to Nausicaa, whose slender beauty, glimpsed by the wayside, delights the weary minstrel no less than the draught she gives him from her own cupped palms.

The clear sunlight of Homer, uncannily vivid in a picture where no brush-stroke betrays the modern, now changes to the mistier skies that dome the forests of Cæsar's Gaul. The Commentaries lend color and sparkling directness to the tale of *Komm l'Atrébate*, huntsman and warrior and collector of his enemies' heads. After the defeat of his savage fellow-tribesmen by the Romans, Komm becomes an ally of these demigods of the catapult and the magic roads of stone, goes to Britain in Cæsar's service, and witnesses his triumph and discomfiture there. Then, won over to rebellion by resentful Gauls, Komm plots against the Romans; and, escaping the dagger-thrust by which Titus Labienus

had hoped to dispatch him, swears vengeance and joins Vercingetorix.

The rebellion fails. A fugitive now, living by the chase, Komm stumbles one day upon the stone city which had taken the place of his old camp. Disguised as a pedlar, he enters the town, marveling at its corruption and its luxury, for not understanding, he hates the arts of Rome. At last he comes to the new amphitheater, and there slays by stealth a young Roman writing poetry to his mistress in the twilight of early dawn.

Marcus Antonius comes to Gaul as quæstor. Gradually the Gauls become Romanized, shaving, dressing, and building as the Romans do. An exile in the forest, Komm has fallen to guerilla warfare, then to mere indiscriminate brigandage. Hostages are legally murdered for his misdeeds; an unsuccessful expedition is organized against him. Komm keeps in hiding until he has satisfied his private vengeance against the tool of Labienus; then, finding his enmity gone with his revenge, he sues for peace and obtains it from the quæstor.

Thus, by a masterly choice of incident, the story becomes typical of an epoch. A world policy is crystallized in this purely objective relation. Rome conquers in the end, by op-

posing the calm tenacity and order of her durable organization to the weakness of barbarian individualism, incapable of long-continued resistance, destined to perish as surely as the war it had waged dwindled and died in mere highway robbery.

War again—the civil war of Italy in the thirteenth century—furnishes the subject of *Farinata degli Uberti*, with its clever characterization of the mingled cruelty, egoism, and patriotism of the old Florentine who, at Arbia, betrayed his fellow citizens in the interests of his party and his private vengeance. Farinata justifies himself by his resistance, afterward, to the Ghibellines, victorious and eager to destroy that nest of Guelphs. And this contrasted tableau of patriotism in an age of feuds ends in the hero's declaring himself an atheist and a disciple of Epicurus, skeptical alike of heaven and of that hell into which Dante's lines have thrust him.

*Farinata degli Uberti* is hardly a story, nor are the other scenes in this historical pageant. *Le roi boit* gives one a contrasted picture of France in the Hundred Years' War; for the merry feast in the rich monastery is interrupted by a murder swift and ferocious as the deeds of the soldier-factions which are desolating



France outside the convent walls. And finally, in *La Muiron*, we meet the Man of Destiny returning from Egypt, calm and confident in his long flight through the English squadron, trusting in the star which points to the land of his glory and his fall. Fascinated by the problems of a temperament so different from his own, Anatole France had already discussed Napoleon in *Le Lys rouge*; now he presents objectively his earlier analysis. Napoleon, to him, is the perfect type of the man of action, who lives wholly in the present, the automaton of determinism who believes in Fate rather than in human will. "Etre grand, c'est dépendre de tout." And as Anatole France feels the philosopher is a far superior type, he naturally adorns his hero's fatalism with some touches of superstition.

Thus ends *Clio*, vivid as Flaubert's tales, colorful as the illustrations drawn for the book by Alphonse Mucha. One regrets that the vogue of the artist has long since exhausted the edition, so that it is now almost unobtainable outside the greater libraries.

"History is an art, and one succeeds in it only by the imagination." Ten years before *Clio*, Anatole France had come to this conclu-

sion, set down in the second edition of *Sylvestre Bonnard*, in the essays, and in *Le jardin d'Épiqueure*. But this denial of historical science came from a student of history, from one who had early learned her boasted methods; and all through these years given up in part to historical fiction, he had been working on his *Vie de Jeanne d'Arc*. Back in the eighties he had conceived the basic idea of his treatment, consigned at once to the pages of *La Vie littéraire*;<sup>1</sup> and if Professor Bergeret so often reverts to the Maid, it is because his *alter ego* is deep in research: so deep, in fact, that he found it most natural to adopt that professorial mask.

In 1908, Anatole France published two bulky volumes, the fruit of these two decades. "I have restored the Maid to life and to humanity," he declares in his Preface.<sup>2</sup> And every reader of her story, so simply and beautifully told, will carry away a portrait of Joan both living and human, and far more real than any ecclesiastical or transcendental interpretation. He will carry away, too, a vivid picture of the age, with all its lawlessness and cruelty, its ignorance and superstition; he will realize the long martyrdom, the grievous travail by which the French nation was born. For never does the

<sup>1</sup> II, 269.

<sup>2</sup> English edition.

author let slip a chance to clear up a point by a parallel, to quote a legend, or tell an illuminating anecdote. The hasty reader may balk at this, but the student who would learn will only praise.

Thus conceived, not as a saint, or a seeress, but as a mystic and an heroic girl, limned in the style of the old chronicles, a style at once simple and rich with expressive archaism, the figure of Joan has all the directness and pathos, all the human unity of a heroine in a great historical novel. Only occasional touches of irony, called forth in the main by ecclesiastical stupidity or guile, reveal the author. No pathological discussions mar the narrative; here at least, as he says in the Preface, he accepts Joan as "a saint, a saint with all the attributes of fifteenth-century sanctity," but he does show the natural cause of her visions, trace her resemblance to similar visionaries, like Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Colette of Corbie. By these and by other parallels he explains her, with her heroic hallucinations, finding beneath the directness of her actions the automatism of all the mystics. And thus he makes her human and understandable, after the manner of Renan in his *Vie de Jésus*.

Matters of science like these, however, are

kept in the Introduction, together with a long examination of the sources. It is here, too, that he tells us by what pains that unity of tone was obtained; how "the difficulty of entering into the spirit of a period lies not so much in what one must know as in what one must not know." How hard for a biographer of Joan to forget that the earth is round, that the stars are not lamps but suns, to substitute for the cosmogony of Laplace the science of Dante and Saint Thomas!—He speaks of the travels which give color to his landscapes, from the first picture of the misty river-valley of Joan's birthplace, so favorable to dreaming, to the gaunt half-timbered houses which beheld the final scene of the tragedy at Rouen. He tells us how lovingly he had studied everything left by the fifteenth century, works of stone or iron or wood, figures carved and painted by men who lived nearly five hundred years ago. And he adds, "As I gazed at the old miniatures, they seemed to live before me, and I saw the noblemen in the absurd magnificence of their sham velvet, the dames and demoiselles somewhat diabolic with their horned caps and their pointed shoes; clerks seated at the desk, men-at-arms riding their chargers and merchants their mules, husbandmen performing from April till March

all the tasks of the rural calendar; peasant women whose broad coifs are still worn by nuns; and I drew near to these folk, who were our fellows, and who yet differed from us by a thousand shades of thought and feeling; I lived their lives; I read their hearts."

This is perhaps why Anatole France has achieved so real a portrait in his *Life of Joan of Arc*. "To succeed in history one must have imagination,"—an imagination directed by love. And if, beguiled by his vision, he possibly drew with too free a pen, if his references were corrected by Andrew Lang and others, no professional scholar could be quicker than he was to acknowledge his mistakes and to correct them. "I have written this history with ardent, tranquil zeal," he declares, "I have sought Truth strenuously, I have met her fearlessly. Even when she assumed an unexpected aspect I have not turned from her."<sup>8</sup> With this affirmation we must leave to time and the historians the evaluation of his *magnum opus*, which he defends with quiet dignity in his Introduction.

As we have seen, *La Vie de Jeanne d'Arc* was more than twenty years in the making. With it, Anatole France had begun an histor-

<sup>8</sup> Introduction, English edition.

ical novel, not to be completed until four years later, after a period of relaxation marked by three volumes of satire. Last of his serious novels, *Les Dieux ont soif* (1912) harks back to those Revolutionary times of which he had given us so many anecdotes in earlier works. It is a picture of the every-day life of 1793, a novel in which people eat and drink and sleep, indifferent, as many of us in 1914, to the tremendous drama of contemporary history. Weary of the dream of fraternity which they have not found, their interest turns solely to pleasure parties, to songs and plays and romances: the scarcity of food is more to them than the Republic; each great event dwindles as it enters their dwarfish minds and becomes as insignificant as they. In the background rages the Revolution: we hear vaguely of military disasters, of foreign plots; we get a passing glimpse of Marat and of Robespierre, of the goddess Guillotine, of the "woman Antoinette" on her way to the block. But never absent from the picture is the Revolutionary Tribunal, constantly growing in power, until at the end it becomes a *bête mystique*, like the mine in *Germinal*. "The prisons were full, the public accuser worked eighteen hours a day. To the defeats of the armies, to the revolts of

the provinces, to the conspiracies, the plots, and the betrayals, the Convention opposed the Reign of Terror. The gods were athirst."

The hero of the story is the young painter Gamelin, austere and rigid as the works of his master David. Made a member of the Revolutionary Tribunal through the offices of a scheming adventuress, he is transformed by his conception of duty and patriotism into a judicial machine, inhuman and unfeeling as the knife itself. In the end he becomes a monster, sacrificing friend and foe alike, inflexible even to the claims of a mother and sister. Against this type, so antipodal to the humanitarian hedonism of the author (remember his strictures on the "inhumanity of Pascal") is set the figure of the ruined tax-farmer Brotteaux, a "joyous atheist," contented even in the attic where he makes jumping-jacks to earn his bread, enjoying life still as a spectacle, and reading his pocket Lucretius as he waits his turn in the bread line. Smiling, suave, immaculate in his threadbare coat, old Brotteaux typifies the eighteenth century of the "philosophes," the placid skepticism as well as the grace and manners of the *ancien régime*. His is the philosophic nihilism of the earlier Bergeret and of Doctor Trublet (was he conceived

at the same time?); and he has no faith in the Revolution. "When you wish to make men good and wise, free, temperate, and generous, you are of necessity led to the desire to kill them all. Robespierre believed in virtue, he produced the Reign of Terror: Marat believed in justice, he demanded two hundred thousand heads."

"Look where you please, Nature shows us but two spectacles, Love and Death." This dictum of earlier days might have served as epigraph for *Les Dieux ont soif*, so skilfully is the carnival of blood relieved by the idyl of love. Even Gamelin loves, even he repeats with all the world the lyric phrases of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Others love with the pagan directness of the earlier eighteenth century, but every one puts a feverish ardor into his passion, knowing how soon it may be quenched in the crimson stream flowing down into the Seine. Otherwise the Revolution does not exist for them, ironic puppets of the primal force of life. Eros is king, joining lovers' hands through prison-bars, holding back on the witness-stand words that might have saved; sending these aristocrats with a kiss on their lips, down the dusty road to death, brave and silent, indifferent



as the pagan Horace to their impending doom.  
For well they know that—

*"Omnes eodem cogimur: omnium  
Versatur urna: serius ocus  
Sors exitura, et nos in aeternum  
Exilium impositura cymbae."*

Thus the novel sets forth the grace of a fallen aristocracy, a society ruled by hedonism. It is a pagan protest against the rigid ethics of Corneille—against that pure idealism which makes men monsters like Gamelin. Epicurean after its first vanished dream of a millennium, this was just the period to fascinate one like Anatole France: in 1793, the vortex of events shortened human life to a span hardly longer than the lives of flowers. So he loves this age, loves it for its tragic brevity—that is evident in the perfection of his masterpiece, so long caressed by the patient graver and the file. If the plot is still loose, if the novel does not end at its real climax, dragging a bit after the fall of Robespierre and the execution of Gamelin, the construction elsewhere is marvelous in its contexture of sombre realism and lyric idyl. Exquisite the modulation of the rhythm, the "dying fall" of the chapter-endings; wonderful the art which turns the commonest incident to a symbol; the jumping-jacks of Father

Longuemare, the roses heaping the merry cariole, the carnations blooming in Elodie's window—a scarlet thread running gaily through their story, until the last blossom falls at the feet of the doomed lover in the tumbril, borne past her chamber to his patriot's end.

“Maintenant je pourrais bien m’amuser un peu.” Inevitably, one thinks of Renan's excuse, when, his life-work of research ended, he turned his weary pen to dialogues on chastity and euthanasia and dramas like *L'Abbesse de Jouarre*. At the unveiling of the Tréguier statue, in 1903, Anatole France quotes this saying of his quondam master, a bon mot which might well have served him also to explain the less serious books with which he was to diversify his scholarship and amuse his old age.

Now he gives us four volumes of satire. Finishing his study of the Maid, he relieves the later intervals of this task by a parody, a burlesque history of France. Written more rapidly, because written more easily, *L'Ile des Pingouins* also bears the date 1908: but if *Jeanne d'Arc* followed the spirit and method of Renan, this mock history is conceived and written in the manner of his later model, the author of *La Pucelle* and *Le Monde comme il va*.

A modern Voltaire, Anatole France now turns to caricature the legends he had loved so well in earlier years. He tells us of a certain Saint Maël, a Breton monk famous for his missionary zeal. Long used to travel over the seas, as the early missionaries, in a miraculous trough of stone, he is tempted by the Devil to fit out this Heaven-sent boat with sails and rudder and prow of wood. So, by his eagerness to reach an erring flock, he puts himself unwittingly in the power of the Adversary. A frightful tempest springs up, and, driven out of its course, the evil boat carries the monk far away to the frozen Antarctic seas. At last the good man recognizes the devils blowing into his sails, exorcises them with the sign of the cross and, worn out and half-blinded by the spray and the glittering ice, he lands safely on a little isle. There he finds a colony of penguins, which he exhorts in myopic faith as the human inhabitants of the isle; and hearing them quack assent in their barbarian tongue, he baptizes them one and all. Imagine now the consternation in Heaven, the confusion among the doctors and saints, the problem suddenly presented to the Deity. What is the effect of this baptism? Is the sacrament valid through its spirit or through its form? Are the penguins

now damned, although they are birds and not of the seed of Adam? Finally, the necessity of affirming the formal virtue of baptism obliges the good Lord to change the penguins to men, give them human bodies and immortal souls. So the repentant saint performs the miracle, after which, fearing a relapse of faith in his converts, he tows the little island back to the Breton shore.

Henceforth this parody of Saint Brendan's legend is a transparent burlesque of our human origins and of French history. By another device of the crafty Adversary, the Penguins are clothed and the female invested with the sorcery of sex-illusion. Brute force still rules these animals, founding the institution of property, consecrating inequality in opinion and law. Then comes the age of myth: a devastating dragon, personified by a vigorous bandit, is led into captivity through the "virgin" predicted by Saint Maël. And if conventions permitted, one would like to quote from this Voltairian travesty of the legend of Saint Martha and the Tarasque, wherein the slayer (and inventor!) of the dragon becomes the first king of the Penguins, and the new Martha their patron saint. Inimitable too is the chapter on the Penguin Primitives, with its obvious satire of

Ruskin and English Preraphaelitism, and very significant are the pages in which the author rehabilitates Virgil from the quasi-conversion related by Dante, *Marbode aux enfers*.

By such characteristic fragments, the parody is brought down to modern times, to things which Anatole France had seen and chafed under. But as he caricatures Boulanger, the "affair," and the corruption of modern politics tainted with Clericalism, Royalism, and amorous intrigue, the matter of his text is suddenly expanded beyond all proportion: half the book is given over to these chapters, which leave the balder style of the chronicle for the circumstantial realism of a novelist or a modern historian. This may indicate that the earlier portion was sketched in before *Histoire contemporaine*: but it certainly proves the ineffaceable imprint of a world seen too well from Monsieur Bergeret's eyes.—Finally, the historian turns his gaze to the future. "Houses could never be built high enough," he tells us, "fifteen millions of men toiled in the giant city." Built on capitalism and industrial oppression, a human ant-hill with no vision save the pursuit of lucre, this blind, cruel, spawning monster perishes at the hands of a few idealists, a vast holocaust to the goddess Anarchy. Then fol-

lows a period of decadence and barbarism: centuries pass; wild huntsmen pursue the bear upon the site of the forgotten capital. Centuries pass, nomads and shepherds and rude farmers live there in turn. At last, after many invasions, many wars, the straggling villages grow to towns, the straggling towns unite to form a capital. Then "houses could never be built high enough; fifteen millions of men toiled in the giant city." Thus the story ends, breaking off abruptly its endless cycle of despair.

Here is a prophecy not to be reconciled with the optimism of *Sur la pierre blanche*. Has the author repented, since he returns now to the fatalism first expressed in *Jocaste*? Critics have called *L'Ile des Pingouins* the burial of an illusion, finding the author in the idealistic astronomer Bidault-Coquille, who by the side of Colomban the sociologist (Zola), leaves his tower to fight for Pyrot (Dreyfus), unjustly accused of selling eighty thousand bundles of hay to a hostile empire. Bidault does not find among the Pyrotins that pure love of truth which spurred him to action, and so he goes back disheartened to his tower, glad to escape from the crowd again. "You imagined," he says to himself, "that at one stroke you could establish justice in your country and in the uni-

verse. You were a brave man, an honest idealist, but lacking in the philosophy of experience. . . . And now that you have lost your illusions, now that you know that it is hard to redress wrongs and that the task is never finished, you return to your asteroids. You are right, but have no pride in your returning, Bidault-Coquille!"

Is this more than a moment of discouragement? Certainly the Introduction of the contemporaneous *Jeanne d'Arc* affirms the optimism of the author, his faith in human progress and the coming of universal peace. But consigned to a book, a moment of discouragement seems permanent; a sensitive artist may dwell upon defeat until it crystallizes into a Mephistophelian *speculum mundi*.

"Alas, one's power to love declines and dies away in old age, like all the other energies of man,"<sup>4</sup> said Anatole France in 1881. Did his irony lose its indulgence, not because life made him bitter, but because all irony corrodes its vessel in the end? At any rate, this purely satiric vein goes on: all the foibles of human character are held up to ridicule in his next volume. *Les sept femmes de la Barbe-bleue*, based on "authentic documents," is, to be sure,

<sup>4</sup> *Sylvestre Bonnard*, p. 98.

merely a mock-scientific investigation of the legend, rehabilitating the worthy gentleman whose matrimonial experiments ended fatally—through the vices of his wives! But the other tales of the volume are far more pungent than this satire of women, which only proves that Anatole France is far from the days when he retold legends not as a satirist but as an artist.

Take for instance the next story, *Le miracle du grand Saint-Nicolas*. The parody of scientific method continues in the care with which the hero of the nursery rhyme is distinguished from the Lycian bishop, but the satire of the story cuts more deeply. According to popular legend, Saint Nicholas resuscitated from the innkeeper's pork barrel three tender children which mine host had killed and salted down seven years before. Anatole France develops the theme and, like Voltaire in one of his "Tales," shows the results of this intervention. Adopted by the bishop, all three boys live and grow up, but one robs him and despoils his church, another debauches his beloved niece, while the third, taking orders in spite of his advice, sows in his bishopric a frightful heresy, the scandal of which drives the good prelate out of his palace, excommunicate, to atone for it in the solitude of the hills. There he meets



another penitent, converted by the miracle—the innkeeper. The inscrutable ways of Providence are at last explained!

Then there is the story of Sleeping Beauty, or rather of the dissolute minister of the royal court who, after his secular slumber as before, still denies the existence of fairies. This is a satire of cheap skepticism, the skepticism of the French middle classes. But better than this piece of eighteenth-century badinage, whose humor displays an unusual indelicacy of taste, is the tale which fills the last half of the book, *La Chemise*.

Transplanted to a modern setting, this is simply the old story of the royal *Malade imaginaire* who was told to endue the shirt of a perfectly happy man. The King, who seems to be drawn after the pleasure-seeking Leopold of Belgium, has no evident reason for melancholia. His well-managed constitutional government gives him little trouble, for having found his actions ineffective, or productive of the wrong effects, he has learned to leave it entirely to his ministers. He is free to follow his own pleasures, as he has always done. But he is bored, bored with everything, ridden by melancholy as by the Old Man of the Sea. He loses sleep and appetite, suffers vague pains, which in-

crease in spite of every treatment. Finally he seeks aid from a new physician, a believer in natural remedies, who decides that the necessary tonic is a shirt imbued with an optimist's excess of joy. Two courtiers take up the quest of the shirt, or rather the quest of the happy man. But the noble lord who is first approached secretly laments that he is not yet a marquis, the popular orator regrets that he is not an aristocrat. An heroic duke, the savior of his country, is senile and the victim of his servants; one millionaire is a dyspeptic and another lives in fear of being robbed. The connoisseur, in his palace filled with treasures, is vexed by a chimney-stack which spoils his view, the ladies' favorite is mated to an old hag. One fears death, being a Jansenist, another because he is an Epicurean. The famous musician is secretly jealous of the popular song-writer. One happy man they do find, but he has just taken the resolution to die. Meanwhile the King is sinking fast; in desperation, a huge commission now examines hundreds of men a day. Women are excluded, for the prescription must be followed literally. Besides, as one of the courtiers observes, "in our class they do not bring up their children, do not direct their households, know nothing, do nothing, and kill themselves

with fatigue; they consume themselves in shining; theirs is only a candle's life." Finally, after a search in the remotest parts of the kingdom has yielded but one hopeful case, a charitable priest, and he has confessed the secret anguish of his loss of faith, they discover a poor half-witted vagabond, careless and merry as the day is long. Yes, he is happy—he admits the condition although he does not know the word; but when they offer him a fortune for his shirt, he hasn't any!

This is the very whip-lash of Voltaire. Wielded gracefully but lightly by Jérôme Coignard, its strokes had gained force under the hand of Bergeret; until the master's gymnastic swiftness was reenforced by something of his terrible vigor—something of that sarcastic strength which always lifted from his victim's back the bleeding strip of skin. But Voltaire's influence, persistent as it is upon the later irony of Anatole France, is mingled and diluted in all these books with that of other humorists, humorists more likely to amuse than that terrible postillion of humanity. Like Doctor Trublet, like Professor Bergeret, Anatole France is become a great lover of Rabelais and his kind.

"Oh Milesian tale-writers, oh subtle Petronius, oh my Noël du Fail," exclaims the Pro-

fessor, seeking oblivion from present tribulation on the book-shelf where, bound in leaves of missals, stand his *Pantagruel*, his *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*, his copy of *Des Périers*;—"Oh precursors of Jean de la Fontaine! What teacher of men was wiser and better than you, so commonly called scallywags! Oh my benefactors! You have taught me the true science of life, a benevolent contempt of men."<sup>5</sup>

Such a devotion could not fail to bring its fruit. Rabelais inspired Bergeret's fable, *Les Trublions*, and also the modern fabliau *Jean Coq et Jean Mouton*. His love of the apologue again crops out in *L'Ile des Pingouins*, and with it, the long comic enumerations so dear to the Curé of Meudon. Henceforth, this becomes one of the disciple's favorite tricks of style, a device particularly frequent in the volume of satiric fables containing *La Chemise*. And obviously, Rabelais inspired the sparkling Molièresque *Comédie de celui qui épousa une femme muette* (1913), the story of a book-lover forced to seek compensatory deafness from the physicians who had loosed the maddening tongue of his spouse.

Of course one may make of Rabelais too constant a companion. Great as he is, he knew

<sup>5</sup> *Mannequin d'osier*, p. 160; *L'Anneau*, p. 182.

no taste, and even an artistic nature may be swept away by his rollicking humor into a license which ceases to be unconscious and innocent upon the lips of a modern. So it happened with Anatole France, when age and ennui had broken down the bounds of his earlier classicism; and the result of this evolution was *Les Contes de Jacques Tournebroche* (1909) and *La Révolte des anges* (1914).

The first of these is a collection of amusing but trivial tales and sketches, at times gross as *Le joyeux Buffalmacco*, and mostly written in the French of the sixteenth century. Remarkable for the ease with which he handles this archaic idiom, they are quite lacking in the philosophic depth which alone might excuse their lapses into broad humor. The author is simply amusing himself, giving free vent to that love of the scabrous which the scholar, so bound by constraint in ordinary life, sometimes displays in the smoking-room of his favorite club. But in *La Révolte des anges* the humor has its moral—its implication rather—for anything like a conventional moral will be invisible except to pagans like the author.

This implication is enwrapped in a Manichean fantasy such as inspired *L'humaine tragédie*. "The Revolt of the Angels" is the story

of a new conspiracy against Heaven, against the Jahveh of the Old Testament and the Talmud, whom Anatole France, like Renan, sees as a cruel despotic demiurge, opposed to that science and enlightenment which he personifies in Lucifer. This dualistic theory of the world had interested him since he wrote *Thaïs*; now, with contemporary Paris as a setting, he describes the plot suggested to one of earth's fallen angels by the many-voiced volumes of a library filled with theology, science, and philosophy. The chief conspirators are cherubim, seraphim, and archangels, drawn to earth by motives often far from angelic, and living there as Russian nihilists, musicians, Bohemians of every sort. But more than this, their historian makes them subject to very human frailties, the everlasting frailties of Bergeret's favorite tales, and to their clear deterministic vision opposes the moral prejudices of men, so that the young Frenchman involved in their circle becomes in the end protector to his own guardian angel. We learn of their secular rôle in the history of man, who owes to them his progress, his learning, and his civilization; and the chapters in which the flute-player Nazaire (Pan) relates in dreamy recollection the long course of celestial and human history are perhaps the best in

the book. Here we are told that Lucifer's attack upon Heaven had failed only because of the thunderbolts launched against him; but with that secret of the demiurge laid bare by the Quaker Franklin, this disparity need no longer exist. So the conspirators prepare a great store of bombs, organize their force, and seek the Adversary to implore his leadership. Then Lucifer has a dream, a vision in which he does conquer Heaven and drive out his enemy, only to find that nothing is accomplished after all. For with the recognition of Rome he only grows cruel as the power he had hated, while opposition now makes his enemy tolerant and just. So, realizing that victory has merely inverted their rôles, that wars only engender wars, he refuses the proffered generalship, preferring the lowly scene of his past labors to Heaven, and the greater victory over ignorance and fear to any conquest of the skies.

The meaning of the story, full of repeated epigrams and "effects" and vaguely recalling *La Rôtisserie* without its taste and moderation, is thus the uselessness of war. Such was the message this modern Lucian once more gave his country—and Europe—in February, 1914. Six months later the Republic—and Europe—were plunged into the world war.

## CHAPTER X

POSTSCRIPT AND CONCLUSION.





## X

**I**N the beautiful little Villa Saïd, with its stained-glass windows opening toward the Bois de Boulogne—a scholar's retreat filled with books and works of art chosen to reflect the period which he is studying—the pandemonium of war interrupted an old man's quiet. He answered the call like a hero and a philosopher. In that first wild hour of passionate hatred, when the whole Republic was clamoring for vengeance, he wrote a letter recalling his fellow-citizens to moderation, urging Frenchmen not to forget that humanity is above all nations. Then, when the real peril of invasion made patriotism paramount, and the storm of criticism and obloquy broke upon his head, the veteran of 1870 put aside his pen and offered his sword. Too old to pass the physical examination in October, he was allowed to help his country in other ways, and his next book, written and sold for the profit of the wounded,

was a glorification of its defenders fighting or fallen, *Sur la voie glorieuse* (1915).

Pacifist that he is, Anatole France at once saw and admitted the necessity of war: "We must destroy from top to bottom the military power of Germany, take from that barbarous people all possibility of pursuing their dream of a world empire." For "they have taken from the art of warfare all its laws, all its moderation, all the humanity still left in it. They had killed peace, now they are killing war. They are making war a monster too ugly to live." He knows now that "it is criminal to make appeals to peace, to desire peace until the forces of oppression are destroyed": indeed, one letter even preaches the duties of neutrals toward the champions of civilization, united to the last socialist among them. Every page of the volume breathes the same fire of patriotism, from the Christmas letter to the soldiers through the final appeal to Frenchmen on their national holiday: "What you are defending is your native land, that smiling fertile land, the fairest in the world: it is your fields, your meadows . . . . What you are defending is your own church-belfry, your roofs of brick and slate, the tombs of your fathers and the cradles of your children. What you are defending is our

proud cities, rearing along the river-banks the monuments of generations. . . .our glory of old. . . .What you are defending is our mortal patrimony, our *mores*, our customs, our laws, our habits, our beliefs, our traditions: 'tis the works of our sculptors, our architects, our artists. . . . 'tis the song of our musicians; it is the mother-tongue which for eight centuries flowed unceasing from the lips of our poets, our orators, our historians, our philosophers, 'tis the science of man and nature. . . .What you are defending is the French genius, which gave the world light and brought to the nations liberty. What you are defending. . . .is not only France but Europe."

One would like to quote in their entirety these final pages, worthy of the address to *La petite ville* which is here reprinted from *Pierre Nozière*, pages admirable in their piety toward the glorious past and the future of the fatherland. But no less admirable is the devotion of their author, the arch-skeptic, sweeping him again, at seventy, into the resistless stream of action; no less wonderful is the faith and enthusiasm which revived in the would-be volunteer the generous defender of Dreyfus, nearly twenty years before. . . . .

"We do not remain one moment the same, and yet we never become different from what we are,"<sup>1</sup> said Anatole France at thirty. But what is the stable element in this restless soul? Is it the poet or the naturalistic novelist, the dilettante or the patient historian, the mystic or the rabid anticlerical, the amiable skeptic or the bitter polemic, the cynical satirist or the reformer, the scoffer at men or the humanitarian and builder of a new Utopia? What is constant in this changing kaleidoscope of phases or moods?

Halt your kaleidoscope at any figure, and take it apart. Some of the colors are covered by others, but underneath lie all the elements of every pattern. Take Anatole France in any of his phases, and you find, balanced or conflicting or dominated one by the other, his two basic elements: an imagination essentially romantic and a Voltairian keenness of analysis. And under all their changes of pattern plays the *sensibilité nerveuse* which he early noted in Racine: in other words the artist's temperament, vibrant and sensuous, richly responsive but a shade too delicately poised—a nature which after its first contact with life is bound to

<sup>1</sup> *Génie latin*, p. 309.

turn away from its ugliness to that softer reflection of reality given by literature and art.

"There are times when everything surprises me, times when the simplest things give me the thrill of a mystery,"<sup>2</sup> he writes at forty. This is the faculty which makes the poet, the mystic, the curious and eager dilettante. "Imagination turns into an artist a man whose feeling is stirred, and a brave man into a hero."<sup>3</sup> This is the faculty which makes the idealist and the dreamer of reform.

Fond of the marvelous and the exotic, enamored of the past, subjective and sentimental beneath all his irony, finding in memory "une Muse divine,"<sup>4</sup> his imagination is undeniably romantic. But against that influence works the acid of an intellect analytic as Voltaire's, solving or dissolving all; and if its rational activity, which gives us the scholar, the philosopher, and the satirist, does not invariably end in cynicism, one may be reasonably sure of that result in a temperament self-betrayed by its visions and wounded through its abnormal sensitiveness. Before that final change, however, his intellect finds pause on Montaigne's pillow of doubt, and happily warmed by imagination, enjoys for over a decade a sage's dream.

<sup>2</sup> *Livre de mon ami*, p. 6.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.    <sup>4</sup> *L'Anneau*, p. 190.

Who, could we choose, would not live the golden forties with Anatole France? In those cloister days, protected like his long adolescence, even the "nervous sensibility" of the artist combines suavely with his mental faculties, urging fancy and intellect alike to explore. Rooted in an ardently sensitive nature, "that high curiosity, which,"—as he tells us,—“was to cause the confusion and the joy of his life, devoting him to the quest of that which one never finds,”<sup>5</sup> now leads the poet and the scholar to a past infinitely more attractive than the present. An egoist, an intellectual romanticist, loving the past less for truth's sake than for the escape it offers to his imagination, where it reflects itself as richly as a woman's beauty in a Renaissance mirror, he loves too the ideas of the past, the ideas of the present, the marvels of science, the Utopias of the reformers, the poetry in all of man's pageant of philosophy, whereof he believes not a single word. We may rightly blame the selfishness of this attitude, but even an idle curiosity may produce for us the gift of beauty. So with this intellectual hedonist: in his richly furnished mind each new impression echoes and reechoes, until somewhere down the gallery of memory it strikes to music

<sup>5</sup> *Pierre Nozière*, p. 14.

a forgotten harp or violin. For Anatole France lives in his memory as he lives in art and reality.

Yes, reality. Even this skeptical monk of letters cannot completely shut out the real world, the world of feeling and experience. "Like others, skeptics too are subjected to all the illusions of the universal mirage, they too are the playthings of appearances; sometimes vain forms cause them to suffer cruelly. Useless for us to see the nothingness of life; a flower will sometimes suffice to fill it to overflowing."<sup>o</sup>

There, surely, the conflict of his temperament stands revealed. Impossible for him to reconcile his intellect, his pessimism, with the sensuously imaginative love of beauty which draws him—with that passion which fires his artist's blood before life's tragic moments of beauty—brief foam-flowers lapsing into waves of ugliness or a flood-tide of indifference or despair. Impossible to reconcile this conflict, which makes Bergeret, beset by provincial vulgarity, "dream of a villa with a white loggia set above a lake of blue, where, with his friends, he might converse in the perfume of myrtles, at the hour when the moon comes forth to bathe in a sky

<sup>o</sup> *Vie littéraire*, II, 175.



pure as the gaze of the good gods and soft as the breath of the goddesses.”<sup>7</sup> Awakened like Bergeret by stones crashing through his library window, an oversensitive type will turn back to his books, longing, at least momentarily, for the hermit’s life which will remove him definitely from the incongruities of a world not made for romanticists.<sup>8</sup>

So Bonnard is transformed into Bergeret, who, despite his worship of ataraxy, reveals a latent capacity for emotion—the romantic sensitiveness—in his praise of irony and pity. But in the course of life one gets used to living, learns to love life, to love it even in its ugliness, like the atheist in *La Chemise*. “Moi, j’aime la vie, la vie de cette terre, la vie telle qu’elle est, la chienne de vie.”<sup>9</sup> So the mature Anatole France attains the pessimistic tranquillity of Doctor Trublet and Brotteaux des Ilettes, in whom imagination has at last yielded to intellect, philosophers grown serene with age, no longer lamenting Bergeret’s dream-villa, but content to gather uncomplaining the crumbs of beauty life offers by the way.

In fine, one cannot help thinking that Anatole France looked into the mirror when he drew

<sup>7</sup> *Mannequin*, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> *Livre de mon ami*, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> *Barbe-bleue*, p. 258.

Dechartre in *Le Lys rouge*. Like the artist, he too is "a restless mobile spirit, egoistic and passionate, eager to give himself, prompt to withdraw, loving himself generously in all the beauty which he finds in the world."<sup>10</sup> He too is one who lives for self, for the pleasures his fancy and his intellect and his temperament can give. This makes him an artist, and this gives him the defects of the artist. "There are people who are masters of their impressions, but I cannot imitate them."<sup>11</sup> So he is the victim of his qualities, unable to coordinate or discipline either intellect or imagination. "I have never been a real observer, for the observer must have a system to guide him, and I have no system at all. The observer directs his vision; the spectator lets himself be led by his eyes."<sup>12</sup>

The results of this yielding to self are shown in his art. All his longer stories are formless: lack of true constructive ability is the real basis of his preference for the tale. Unable to force his talents or coordinate them, he requires twenty years to finish his one piece of serious scholarship. But discipline would have curbed that universal curiosity which is his life's chief

<sup>10</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> *Pierre Nozière*, p. 275

<sup>12</sup> *Livre de mon ami*, p. 115.

interest; the dilettante cannot subordinate his talents, the skeptic can build no system save the skepticism which indulgently tolerates them all.

A man of moods, living after his moods, his subjectivity will always limit his creative imagination. His best characters—the only truly living characters of his novels—are invariably “portraits of the artist.” Aside from that, he can only draw directly from life—as he did with Choulette—or sketch a figure cleverly characterized by the externals which impress his sympathy or his impassive hate. Rather significant, in this connection, is his denial of the creative imagination: “All our ideas come to us from the senses, and imagination consists, not in creating, but in assembling ideas.”<sup>18</sup> So, too, he defends plagiarism and makes creation a matter of style: “Ideas belong to everybody, but as a thought has no value save through its form, to give a new form to an old thought is art in its entirety and the only creation possible to humanity.”

Yet it would be easy to push this criticism too far. The originality of Anatole France is to depict his multiple self, to mould figures into which he can breathe his own ideas, and to make them of enduring metal rather than the

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

usual sawdust or straw. Subjective portraits as they are, Sylvestre Bonnard and the genial Abbé, Professor Bergeret, Doctor Trublet and Brotteaux are enough to compensate for his poverty in creation, which is supplemented by a memory which makes his brain the sum of all he has ever been. For Anatole France lives in his own past as he lives in the past of humanity.

To impose no rein upon imagination or intellect, to avoid discipline and coordination of one's talents to a single end, to follow the self where it listeth, is the mark of the intellectual Epicurean. And perhaps we may even drop the adjective! "Let us not listen to the priests who teach the excellence of suffering," he tells an audience *in propria persona*, "for it is joy which is good....Let us not fear joy, and when a beautiful thing or a smiling thought offers us pleasure, let us not refuse it."<sup>14</sup> Needless to cite proofs: indications of his pagan sensuousness are frequent enough throughout his work, particularly in the growing license of the later books. That fact alone shows the breakdown of pure hedonism as an intellectual ideal. But, on the other hand, here we find the very quality which, at its best and under

<sup>14</sup> *Opinions sociales*, p. 71.

control, creates his finest prose: it is this sensuous vibrancy that gives such an atmospheric afterglow to his pages, which stir the senses and trouble the soul like the poignantly fleeting beauty of a sunset sky. It is a glamor we can only feel, created by one who "would rather feel than understand."<sup>15</sup>

An Epicurean gifted with an active mind, a restless soul ever seeking the unknown, will of course enjoy a longer cycle of pleasures than a mere sensual hedonist. "One wearies of everything except the joys of comprehending." But "books trouble restless souls,"<sup>16</sup> and though comprehension remains a pleasure in the long ranges of the mind, when it comes home again to self its joys are turned to torment. "Our ignorance of our own *raison d'être* must always be a source of melancholy and disgust."<sup>17</sup> When youth is gone and self-centered intellect alone remains, dissolving that hope and illusion which is the spiritual basis of life, when the bitter skeptic has definitely put down the poet and the idealist, he must reaffirm himself by action, and the cloistered Epicurean knows no form of action but writing. Even the skeptic must write—write to regain an illusion for living. He

<sup>15</sup> *Vie littéraire*, II, 191.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, I, vii.

<sup>17</sup> *Jardin*, p. 67.

may not know whether the world exists, but as an artist he does know that his art exists absolutely. We must all believe: the very gymnosophist, sitting in mud on the Ganges banks, hugs a negative belief beneath his squalid immobility. We must believe and *act*, or die: "Whatever be our philosophic doubts, we are forced to act in life as if we had no doubts at all."

So like the homunculus of *Faust*, the romantic Pyrrhonist yields to life's imperative call. He turns to his desk, and there makes a stand against the flux of appearances which Heraclitus first taught by the Ionian sea. He expresses himself, like all of us; and it is well that his generous impulse toward self-expression should seek instinctive form. He may excuse his inconsistency by saying, like Anatole France, that "it is better to speak of beautiful things than not to speak at all," but at heart he knows that he is only the blind instrument of the light that is in him, the slave of a Word that must be made flesh for the salvation of his soul.

And thus, even in his cloister, the artist like the philosopher justifies his existence to the world. He is judged by his results. If the man of stronger passion and simpler mind—the

man of action—finds his self-expression in fighting the universe without, his broader vision and more timorous judgment will retire from that unequal struggle with an age of low ideals, to find a field of action in the universe within. He will live, not in life but in books, that agreeable dilution of life, which even a world of "service" may well allow to those who distil honey for its delight. And if, as with Anatole France, his is too vital a temperament to stay there forever, if finally the same nervous sensitiveness which had led him to art brings him out of his study in generous pity for the oppressed, we must sympathize with him returning in disillusion. Not that such a man needs it: he still has, to console him behind his study doors, the intellectual life, the much-needed critical spirit which alone will make the liberty of our children's world. And some day, reviewing his work and noting in his later loss of poise the brand of the conflict, posterity will regret that Anatole France did not stay in his library, content to remain one of those "for whom the universe is only ink and paper," consoled by the fact that ink and paper and broken marble is all that is left of those who laid the foundations of modern Europe in the little Attic town. To keep to his books, to shut the door

upon the petty struggle, to hold his universal curiosity and his universal sympathy down to the definite task of criticism—there lay the way out for Anatole France. That was Sainte-Beuve's solution of his own similar problem: "J'éventre les morts pour chasser mon spleen."

Of course, such a philosophy has its limitations. After all, the beauty of art is a symbolic beauty. Its larger interest lies in its significance: the masterpiece crystallizes a type of the human spirit arrested at a vital stage. In the calm of the Greek marbles, in the smile of Mona Lisa, in the patient niggling realism of the Dutch school, a whole age is revealed, a phase of humanity caught and fixed for all the generations to come. What is real in the contrast between Watteau's suavity and Millet's rude force is the more definite contrast sensed in the age and the people, in the silent multitudes behind the artists. This matrix, this mass of human flesh, voiceless and inert, forgotten unless it find immortality in such a masterpiece, must always be the critic's background: he paints a portrait, but if chosen rightly, the face sums up the spirit of the age.

Are we justified in finding such a type in Anatole France? Certainly not, if in his work be sought a literal reflection of his larger back-



ground, a panorama of life such as is revealed in the monumental creation of a Balzac. To be sure, something of this kind of realism may be found in *Histoire contemporaine* and others of his modern novels. But from a philosophic standpoint, these are far less significant than *Thaïs* or the tales, which, under the mask of history, present symbolically a spiritual and intellectual portrait of the later nineteenth century in France.

Anatole France typifies his age in its dominant interest, the historical spirit. Revealed to us by Walter Scott, developed by romanticists eager to follow imagination in a flight from reality—fortified, in Flaubert and his school, by archeology and psychology, the great modern study finds in this writer a characteristic devotee. His keen perception of human identity beneath all the manifold differences of time and place teaches him that man's duty is to rewrite history: yet, despite an increasing realism, he is no dupe of the pseudoscientific school of historians. To the end he remains a critic and an artist, re-creating the past through insight and imagination.

He typifies the excessive individualism of this age of democracy. Even in his conservative days he is ardently personal: he cannot keep

self out of his creation. Not merely subjective, like the romanticists, from whom he differs by a greater intellectual reserve, he carries subjectivity into the things of the intellect, and to justify the dilettantism of his attitude, exalts it finally into a philosophy. Hence his skepticism, eager to show the relativity of other men's realities, rising under attack to a devotion toward philosophic nihilism which is a devotion to his own form of dialectic. Barring a few years of pragmatism, this is his dominant attitude: from first to last he is an intellectual anarch, reducing all things to his measure; and in his reaction against all absolutist formulas he has become a large figure in the new philosophy of Humanism.

His pragmatic period, and indeed his whole later evolution, reflects our modern humanitarian and socialistic interests. A corollary of his subjectivity, confessedly grounded upon an Epicurean sensitiveness to pain,<sup>18</sup> this social pity is still real enough to lead him into thorny paths for the sake of justice. Here at least his idealism overrides the skeptic. For as he says, "if the object for which one sacrifices oneself is an illusion, self-sacrifice is none the less a reality, and that reality is the most splen-

<sup>18</sup> *Jardin*, p. 56.

did adornment that man can put upon his moral nakedness."<sup>19</sup> And though, to him, "earth is only a grain of sand in an infinite desert of celestial worlds," none the less he adds: "But if men suffer only upon earth, it is greater than all the rest of the universe. . . . It is everything and the rest is nothing at all."<sup>20</sup>

How different this attitude from the romantic contempt of ordinary humanity, from that hatred of the bourgeois which all his life held Flaubert aloof in the artist's aristocratic pride. Yet Anatole France is one with Flaubert in his cult of art. He too has that devotion to style, born of romantic example and grown into a religion with the Parnassian poets and the author of *Salammbô*. Primarily a stylist, even his reaction against *Le Parnasse*, his rejection of their "splendid" diction for a classical simplicity, is still a devotion to form, a devotion whose labors only a stylist can fully understand. To the end he remains in spirit a Parnassian, polishing his seemingly artless phrases until all trace of effort or workmanship is filed away. So for him there is no unconscious simplicity. "A good style is like yonder beam of light, which owes its pure brilliance to the intimate combination of the seven colors which

<sup>19</sup> *Livre de mon ami*, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> *Jardin*, p. 56.

compose it. A simple style is like white light: it is complex, but it does not seem so. In language, true simplicity is only apparent, and springs merely from the fine coordination and sovereign blending of its several parts."<sup>21</sup>

A conscious artist, he is ever seeking a greater perfection. Remodeling *Sylvestre Bonnard* in 1900, he ponders every phrase and particle in his effort to improve its delicate rhythm. His work has ripened from the beginning, until in *Histoire contemporaine* its finish and contexture are rich enough to dispense with constructive unity. But even *Le Mannequin d'osier* is not so fine as the art of *Les Dieux ont soif*, so carefully polished, so delicately evasive of all that is tedious or obvious, so full of pages which haunt the memory like the cadences of Walter Pater or the songs of Paul Verlaine. Some of its episodes may be open to criticism, but the style is perfection itself.

The charm of these pages is indeed hard to analyze. Always one feels the intellectual qualities underneath, the philosophy, the humor. It is the charm of ironical detachment, the mask so often adopted by the disillusioned idealist. It is a universal irony—seen not merely in the

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

art of inverted statement which Coignard and Bergeret take from Voltaire; it is also the impassive irony of Flaubert, recounting in cold moderation abuses which clamor for emotional treatment, for the lash of sarcasm or indignation. And with all this it is the irony of Renan, those indefinable overtones of an ironic temperament, divided between imagination and intellect. Poised condor-like over a serio-comic universe, this fantastic humor seizes contrasts which startle or appal.

If primarily intellectual, his charm is also due to qualities which belong to the poet as well as the philosopher. The art of Anatole France is a product of his imagination, his taste, and his musical sense. Symbolic of his whole creation is his statement concerning the ballad which first revealed to him the virtue of poetry: "In my prose will be found the *disjecta membra* of the poet." This is plain enough when his work is read aloud. Only thus can one realize the flexibility of his diction, which runs the whole gamut of melodic quality without ever losing its purity or its power to express his changing moods: a flexibility which gives the reader all the delicacy of the impression, in a music which seems stolen from the very flute of Pan.

Yet with all his sensuousness he rarely falls

into stylistic exaggeration. His taste may break down as regards matter, but never in his manner or form. It is this which keeps him from the bathos so common in esthetic or rhythmic prose—taste and an intellectuality which the sensation never quite obscures. They save him from that pitfall of French writers, rhetorical emphasis—from that love of sonorous or dramatic effect which makes the theater the dream of every literary Gaul. “Dans tous les genres, il nous faut des Marseillaises.” Taste turns him from this to the poetry which life itself distils, perceptible only to those whose ears are not filled by noise alone. An instinctive tact seems to have led him naturally to the Greeks, rather than to the oratorical Romans so dear to French classicism, and when his old Ciceronian professor of rhetoric criticized him on this point, suggesting that he read “the complete works of Casimir Delavigne,” he felt already that he had found something better. “Sophocles had given me a certain bent which I could not undo.”<sup>22</sup> And all through his life that same taste has kept his genius from the contamination of northern literatures, making him the most truly classical of all the moderns. Alone among contemporaries, Anatole France has

<sup>22</sup> *Livre de mon ami*, p. 170.

grafted the living flower of Hellas upon the Gallo-Latin logic of form.

"You are the genius of Greece made French," said Alfred Croiset in his memorable tribute to Anatole France. "You have taken from Greece her gift of subtle dialectic, of smiling irony, of words which seem endowed with wings, of poetry delicate yet definite and full of luminous reason; and you have shed upon that Greek beauty the grace of the Ile-de-France, the grace which invests her familiar landscapes, and which also lends its beauty to the style of our dearest writers, those who are most delightfully French."

Greek, yet subtly national, this is why Anatole France has taken his place among the great French classics. This is why he must remain a classic. For if literature is the least durable of all the arts, dependent as it is upon words and metaphors which never cease to change, he alone in his generation has chosen the simplicity which suffers least from time. In the last fifteen years, a new literature and a new hope have succeeded the pessimism consequent upon 1870, and when the tinkling poets and morbid self-dissecting novelists are forgotten, when the sickly symbolism or the cruder sensuality of the end of the century has passed like

a cloud in the cold, bright, windswept dawn of to-morrow, we shall remember Anatole France. A monument of that discouraged era, when life itself forced the artist into the esoteric, his books will best recall the delicate age which found its object in an Epicurean cult of art and self. For he alone has avoided the formal dangers of its romantic subjectivity, building not in agate nor in porphyry, but in the cool yet glowing marbles of the Greeks.

A new age is upon us, an age whose first reaction will be toward Life. The cult of the self—"that pearl of degeneration," as a socialist poet calls it—will probably perish. But art will not perish; and in art, we know, works without grace are of no avail. [We shall return to Anatole France some day, come back to his work as the traveler returns to Athens, for the beauty that is hers. As on the Acropolis, we shall think of the labors which built the temple, reared and polished with infinite pains, and wonder why such a devoted artisan should have suffered the reproach of hedonism. We shall marvel at a lost ideal, at a perfection impossible to a time which will have so much to do. And we shall return to our workaday world tempered and exalted by a devotion to art which is also a devotion to truth.]





**CHRONOLOGY OF THE PRINCIPAL WORKS OF  
ANATOLE FRANCE.**



## CHRONOLOGY OF THE PRINCIPAL WORKS OF ANATOLE FRANCE.

(BORN 1844.)

- 1868 Alfred de Vigny, étude.
- 1873 Les Poèmes dorés.
- 1875 Les poèmes de J. Breton, étude.  
Racine et Nicole.  
Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, notice.
- 1876 Les Noces corinthiennes.
- 1879 Lucile de Chateaubriand, étude.  
Jocaste et le Chat maigre.
- 1881 Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard.
- 1882 Les Désirs de Jean Servien.
- 1883 Abeille.
- 1885 Le Livre de mon ami.
- 1886 Nos Enfants.
- 1888-1892 La Vie littéraire, 4 volumes.
- 1890 Balthazar.  
Thais.
- 1892 L'Etui de nacre.
- 1893 La Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque.  
Les Opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard.
- 1894 Le Lys rouge.  
Le Jardin d'Epicure.

- 1895 Le Puits de Sainte-Claire.
- 1897 Discours de réception.  
Le Mannequin d'osier.  
L'Orme du mail.
- 1898 Au petit bonheur, proverbe dramatique.  
La Leçon bien apprise.
- 1899 L'Anneau d'améthyste.  
Pierre Nozière.
- 1900 Clio.  
Filles et garçons.
- 1901 Monsieur Bergeret à Paris.
- 1902 L'affaire Crainquebille.  
Opinions sociales.
- 1903 Histoire comique.
- 1904 Crainquebille, Putois, Riquet, etc.
- 1905 L'Eglise et la République.  
Sur la pierre blanche.
- 1906 Vers les temps meilleurs.
- 1908 L'Ile des Pingouins.
- 1909 La Vie de Jeanne d'Arc.  
Les Contes de Jacques Tournebroche.  
Les sept femmes de la Barbe-Bleue, etc.
- 1910 Aux étudiants, discours.
- 1912 La comédie de celui qui épousa une femme muette.  
Les Dieux ont soif.
- 1913 Le Génie latin.
- 1914 La Révolte des anges.
- 1915 Sur la voie glorieuse.
- 1916 Ce que disent nos Morts.

(A series of English translations, now nearing completion,  
is published by John Lane, New York.)

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